

The Little Book of Fitzartur Foibles

A book of illusions



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STORIES

The Little Book of Fitzartur Foibles

Collected Mallard Papers, Series I: States of Grace

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FITZARTUR FOIBLES

There once were some ducks by the stream,
Whose paddling followed no scheme.
As order decayed,
Their patterns all swayed—
Till chaos fulfilled the dream's theme.



NESTING



1970: Introduction

*Arthur Frederick Blandy, D.Phil. (Syd.),
sometime Fellow in Genealogical Studies*

I have been asked—though by whom precisely I shall not presently recall; it may have been the publishers, or a man purporting to be one—to write a few prefatory remarks to this curious volume, *The Little Book of Fitzartur Foibles*, now finding itself, heaven help it, in print nearly seventy years after its first conception in the smoke-room at Mallard House. I recall, vaguely but with great conviction, that it had already been described then as “unfinished”. So much for progress.

It will, I suspect, strike certain readers—those who read with their eyebrows and not with their imaginations—that the work is uneven. Others, to show that they have read it at all, will murmur “over-intelligent,” while a small but no less tiresome contingent will call it “under-motivated”. They may even, in a fit of adjectival mischief, dredge up the worn-out trio: whimsical, discursive, or that most damning faint praise of all—self-indulgent. One must admire their industry. I, too, have been industrious in my time, though chiefly in polishing the Duke’s boots and occasionally his anecdotes when they threatened to become too recognisably his own.

Yet one cannot, as I have often said to no one in particular, account for taste, still less for criticism. It may, however, be that these estimable readers have simply missed the vital clue—as those unaccustomed to clues so often do. For this, ladies and gentlemen, is not a book to be understood—at least not in any straightforward sense. Fitzartur, and indeed the entire line of Mallardian Dukes, have never been troubled by the vulgarity of transparency. They spoke in riddles as they lived in riddles; their very portraits are enigmas disguised as oil paintings. To read them aright, one must learn to look sidelong.

Permit me, though I am no logician (merely a man who once knew where the silver was kept), to propose that *The Little Book of Fitzartur Foibles* is precisely as it must be. Its irregularities are not deficiencies, but inheritances: the hereditary lurch of the Mallard temperament, half

genius and half distraction. Those who complain of incoherence must understand—it is the family style. Nothing in Mallard House ever ran in a straight line, not the corridors, not the accounts, and least of all the conversations.

I was, if memory serves—and memory, like the Mallards, prefers to be selective—a minor attendant in those days: valet, part-time librarian, accidental correspondent. The Duke's habit was to dictate to whomever was within reach, often while standing knee-deep in the fountain or muttering over a misplaced chess piece. My task was to transcribe. Unfortunately, His Grace's concept of sequence was not my own. Thus entire paragraphs were delivered in what he called "a temporal shuffle," and the resulting text, even after all these years and revisions, retains that noble disorder.

So when the fastidious reader wrinkles his brow and pronounces the book whimsical, he pays, without knowing it, the highest of compliments. When the obtuse reviewer protests its self-indulgence, I would invite him to consider what other type of indulgence could possibly suit a Duke. Were the House of Mallard to have produced something lean, lucid, and disciplined, it would have been a national calamity—like a swan taking up clerical work.

Indeed, one might say that the Mallards never cared to be understood because they were never quite certain of having understood themselves. Their reign—if reign it may be called, for titles today are as threadbare as the tapestries they once guarded—was a long experiment in being misunderstood with grace. This book, then, is no aberration but a faithful continuation of that tradition.

You, dear reader, may feel lost from time to time. Take comfort. So did we all in Mallard House. I recall entire weeks in which even the Duke appeared to have lost sight of his own premises, in both the geographical and philosophical sense. Yet, somehow, order emerged—or, more properly, the illusion of order emerged, which is often all that civilisation requires.

Should you close this book and wonder whether its author has succeeded or failed, I would suggest that you have framed the wrong question. The Mallards do not succeed; they persist. Fitzartur did not write to explain, only to record the elegant entropy of his family and to hear, by echo, the sound of his own lineage unraveling. If you sense that refrain—half melancholic, half amused—you have caught, however briefly, the tone of the house and the habit of its masters.

As for me, I remain, as ever, unqualified either to praise or to condemn. I simply dust the words, set them straight upon the shelf, and step quietly out of the room. Should any confusion linger (and I pray it

does), remember: confusion is the proper condition of anyone who has dined with a Duke more than once.



When the unlettered sneer—and they always do, poor things, because ignorance so often masquerades as wit—I am inclined to remind them, very gently, that the titles are quite real. Quite. One mustn't be apologetic simply because half the descendants of the Round Table have lost their acreage gambling on sheep or marrying into vinegar. Titles, like good pearls, are not diminished by a century or two of neglect. They retain their lustre, provided one has the sense to polish them at intervals, or, failing that, the vanity to brag about them.

It was our most illustrious ancestor who began all this—the original Mallard, a fellow so energetic he makes poor King Arthur look practically suburban. When he “waged,” as he always put it (and what a Mallard word that is; no one else could turn perpetual warfare into a genteel verb), across Gaul, the Rhine, the Alps, and the Pyrenees, he did so not with a sword in each hand—though he might have liked the image—but with a sense of entitlement so unshakable that even dragons were said to have blinked in bewilderment before retreating into the mist.

Arthur himself, by all family accounts, was exceedingly fond of him, though Merlin is supposed to have described the original Mallard as “too confident by half, and the half remaining all conceit”. The remark, far from being taken as criticism, became a sort of household motto. There is a painting somewhere (probably above the housekeeper's cupboard now) showing our Mallard seated at the Round Table between Gawain and a particularly sleek dragon, which he insisted was there only for scale.

Grandmama, who adored a scandal more than a sonnet, used to insist that Mab—the queen of dreams and distinctly fast company—visited him one midsummer's night and pronounced that his offspring would henceforth be born with unmanageable hair and unmanageable ambition. Certainly, that prophecy has carried down the centuries quite faithfully.

The Mallards have, as you can imagine, always thought of themselves as Arthur's “other” family—the ones who made everything work while the official ones were off being chivalric or doomed. There is even a family legend that Arthur, in an administrative moment, remarked that without the Mallards there would be no round table at all, as it was our

ancestral carpenters who cut it into shape (though naturally they were never paid). Some naughty historian once called us “the footnotes of Camelot,” but we prefer to say we provided the punctuation.

In the early charters, fancifully illuminated with all manner of serpents, ducks, and sheep—apparently each beast had symbolic meaning, though it looked more like a farm catalogue—there are grants of land as far-flung as Aquitaine and Kent. Our ancestor, ever the organiser, set his sons, nephews, and yes, his loyal companions as princes, counts, and marquises of those regions. A few of the parchments survive, so brittle they disintegrate if one breathes on them too assertively. The seals, however, are exquisite; one features a stoic duck perched upon a sword hilt, gazing as though it would rather be elsewhere.

Did you imagine those crowns dropped from clouds or were handed about by cherubs? Hardly. The Mallards, with their painful practicality, granted them. And grant them they did, with the satisfied air of people offering things that were, in truth, already theirs.

Of course, time does dreadful things to grandeur. Yet, for all that, the names endure, varnished and revarnished by successive generations, each polishing them as tenderly as the hilts of their splendidly unused swords.

These days, there are fewer princes, more professors and a scattering of eccentric cousins in Tuscany. The titles, though, remain very much alive—breathed upon, embroidered into stories, told at dinner with the same seriousness once reserved for duels.

And so when outsiders—journalists, genealogists, Australians with doctoral theses—roll their eyes and ask if the Mallards were ever “real,” I can only laugh and reply, “Real? My dear, more real than reality itself. After all, Arthur’s own offspring died with legend; ours merely misplaced their castles.”

1920: Introduction

Viscountess Viola Vorpel

There are few English families, I imagine, who have not upon the centre table of their drawing rooms or, more commonly, in the bottom drawer of some devout matron’s cabinet, a Family Bible of such size and solemnity that it appears less a book than a small piece of furniture. In this respectable and rather ponderous volume are inscribed the births and deaths, the matrimonial arrangements, the christenings, the lamentations, and all manner of domestic triumphs of generations past. It is, as it were, the conscience of the English bourgeoisie, bound in calf

and secured by brass clasps. For the Mallards, however, things have always been otherwise.

It has amused me, more than once, to observe the consternation of visitors when they inquire after our Bible and are met with blank looks from the household staff, before some loyal retainer murmurs, “Her Ladyship refers, perhaps, to *The Little Book of Fitzartur Foibles?*” Their relief upon finding that the Dukes of Mallard are not, in fact, heathens is quickly replaced by a new kind of uncertainty when they are presented with this venerable manuscript—its gilt faded, its margins annotated in a dozen hands, its pages alternately missing and overcrowded—and told, quite truthfully, that it is our family’s Bible, though of a markedly unconventional sort.

For *The Little Book of Fitzartur Foibles* serves, in Mallard circles, not as a guide to salvation but as a manual of illumination: first, into the perils of ancestry; and second, into the felicities of our curious and occasionally scandalous history. Where the Family Bible laboriously traces humanity back to Eden, *The Little Book* begins instead at that misty epoch when the first Fitzartur—an adventurer, a scholar, or possibly a usurper, opinions differ—attached his fortunes to a nameless queen and was rewarded, as Mallards ever are, with both dignity and difficulty.

From that point forward, this extraordinary volume has accompanied every generation of the family. It tells us not what to believe, but how to behave—or at least how our forebears thought they behaved, which is much the same thing. Within its pages are enumerated the rules, rituals, and refinements required of any person rash enough to be connected to the House of Mallard. It is at once catechism, cautionary tale, and impenetrable family memorandum.

Those outside our circle may find its style—how shall I put it?—opaque. One must sympathise. *The Little Book*, unlike Holy Writ, was not written for the instruction of all mankind, but for the entertainment and edification of a very few. It is filled with allusions recognisable only to those who have dined at the long table in Mallard Hall or endured the tedium of a Fitzartur council. In several chapters, the author’s meaning is entirely concealed beneath layers of allegory, puns, and family jokes—some of which ceased to be funny before Waterloo. Yet, as I have always said, even obscurity has its uses. The outsider, should he persist, may still discover flashes of something larger: a peculiar, almost mythic sense of continuity linking this house of ours to the grand procession of European minds and monarchs.

Indeed, as family histories go, *The Little Book* is reliably unreliable, if one takes its intention properly. It insists (with that Fitzartur solemnity that so admirably masks mischief) that the Mallards have

known, visited, rescued, or confounded nearly every figure of importance since the fall of Troy. Caesar dined here, Charlemagne borrowed a horse, Elizabeth consulted a Mallard cousin in choosing her pearls. All very improbable—yet strangely, some evidence exists. Those requiring corroboration are invited to consult the archives: bundles of paper in the ducal library, fragmentary letters now preserved in the British Museum, dusty state records at Windsor, and that curious trunk discovered in the cellars at Mallard Hall after the forty-third Duke’s unfortunate experiment with gas lighting.

These documents, haphazard though they are, will provide the patient reader with the necessary context for what follows. They are, if you like, the footnotes to a civilisation. Together, they show that the Mallards have not merely watched history but have been, in their idiosyncratic way, woven into its embroidery.

I do, however, wish to offer a friendly warning to any casual explorer who chances upon this publication. Unlike the comfortable Bible of the average English home, *The Little Book of Fitzartur Foibles* does not yield itself to the inattentive. The Mallard intellect, such as it is, delights in labyrinths. Those who enter will do best to carry a lamp and, if possible, the key—yes, the key—without which certain pages are mere riddles and others nonsense entire. I shall not identify this key; it lies, as it always has, plainly enough at the very beginning of the book, and it has amused generations of us to see how long the uninitiated take to find it. To those who do, I wish every satisfaction and more insight than perhaps we ourselves possess.

And so this, our peculiar altar-piece of paradoxes, stands once again before the world in print. It bears traces of every temperament that ever adorned our line—ironists, dreamers, philosophers, and one or two poets of doubtful morality. Yet in its inconsistencies, its teasing concealments, and its unrepentant eccentricity, it remains, as all things Mallard inevitably do, utterly itself.

Should it bewilder, so be it. The Fitzarturs have always preferred admiration to comprehension.

2005: Introduction

Fenella Vorpel

Several of my colleagues—well-intentioned, perpetually curious, and occasionally burdened by the kind of literalism that plagues modern academia—have commented on *The Little Book of Fitzartur Foibles* as a living demonstration of the family maxim that we shall never be entirely understood. “Why,” they ask, with that particular mixture of

challenge and concern that passes for conversation in faculty lounges, “is the book so small?”

If, as claimed by its latest batch of editors, it represents the Family Bible that most households still insist on misquoting from, then surely, they argue, a work tracing the vast eccentricities of the Mallard and Fitzartur line should be monumental—a tome of unmanageable girth, one that requires both upper-body strength and emotional stamina to approach. A thousand pages at least! Preferably two, if there are illustrations of the more scandalous Mallards.

When I can be troubled to explain—and it depends heavily on the catering at the event in question—I point out that most sacred texts would be trimmed down to pamphlet size if one removed the repetitions, contradictions, and the occasional (if lengthy) mutterings of what can only be described as holy madmen. There are, as we know, two incompatible creation stories, a regular thirst for smiting, and enough self-satisfied genealogies to put a government census to shame.

If *The Little Book of Fitzartur Foibles* had followed that model, it would sprawl across volumes, replete with competing truths and several miraculous misprints. Instead, it is concise—a word I find far more admirable than “little.”

Now, the title itself has provoked almost as much comment as its length. Little, in this instance, bears the same classically ironic weight as Little John—that not-so-little forester from the Robin Hood fable whom we remember, with exaggerated affection, for his ox-like girth and occasional usefulness with a stick. The “little” in *The Little Book of Fitzartur Foibles* performs the same trick: it announces humility while practising hauteur. It whispers, pay no attention, while quietly arranging for posterity to do exactly that.

Of course, those of us unfortunate—or fortunate—enough to be descended from the Mallards know that understatement is our most effective form of spectacle. The book’s size belies its scale. Each of its stories unfurls with a certain calculated unhurriedness, revealing patterns, omissions, and insinuations that collectively enact a kind of narrative geology. To the inattentive reader, this can seem baffling or even dull. To the attentive one, the book expands—indefinitely, almost indecently—under the pressure of meaning.

A longer book could never manage this; it would smother its own implications beneath weight and paper. But this small thing—trim, unyielding, audaciously brief—lays itself open like an experiment in self-revelation. It is the Fitzartur family, distilled: ambiguous, elusive, and refusing ever to end the conversation cleanly.

There is, to be frank, much in *The Little Book* that will confuse, intrigue, or actively dismay the casual reader. Those who expect a

history will be disappointed; those who seek moral guidance will be bewildered; and those who expect coherence should seek another bloodline altogether. It is not meant for the masses—though we are, of course, flattered by your curiosity—but for those of us entangled in the Mallard inheritance: that strange combination of intellectual courage and emotional untidiness that seems to repeat itself, undiluted, across the centuries.

I sometimes compare the book to a family photograph taken before anyone had learned to smile properly. Everyone looks at once important and faintly alarmed. The attentive observer senses that the moment before the shot was not entirely harmonious. That is the enduring charm of our chronicle.

And inevitably, before I can elaborate, I find my interrogator has already wandered off—usually to refill a glass or, more dramatically, to fall asleep mid-discourse. A pity, really. They might have discovered that the littleness of *The Little Book of Fitzartur Foibles* is not a defect but a design: an act of compression worthy of any philosopher, poet, or pedant who has ever sought to contain the vast within the trivial.

But then, I've never trusted those who prefer long books to deep ones.

A little book of disillusion

Should you ever be invited to view *The Little Book of Fitzartur Foibles*, you will find a book which boasts upon its cover no less than an exquisite door; a marvel so finely wrought with an artistry that commands both awe and whispered conjecture.

The frame of this portal, fashioned from dark timber venerable with countless seasons, is polished by hands long surrendered to the passage of time, yet still proud in its ebon sheen. Emerging from this surface, one finds sinuous metalwork lines that weave the sharp austerity of geometry with delicate floral arabesques, a harmonious tension dancing betwixt stark and ornate. Angular facets catch the light's subtle gleam, while sweeping curves twine in a rhythmic embrace, evoking tales as ancient and unrealised as the shadows in a forgotten manor.

At the centre of this grand design sits a keyhole, but not any common aperture—nay, it is sculpted in the shape of a duck. This figure, both regal and whimsical, holds its slender neck in gracious arch; the feathers, chased with the devotion of an artisan whose soul has been poured into each barb, shine beneath a burnished bronze patina. The duck's eye, a polished gem, dazzles as if harbouring silent wisdom, inviting the most curious to contemplate the secrets lurking just beyond this sealed threshold. Surely, this sentinel is a homage to lineage and

symbolism, an elegant liaison where nature and human artistry conspire.

The clasp that guards this ancient tome raises even higher the stakes of delicate engineering. Woven from threads of spun silver with a mesmerising lattice of shimmer and shadow, it catches the eye like moonbeams entrapped in an eternal minuet. The clasp's form is at once geometric and fluid, with angular bands intersecting rhythmic curves, suggesting a tension that echoes that of the door itself. And here again, at the clasp's heart, glimmers the duck-shaped keyhole, as if the creature were poised to spring to life from its silver embrace, its minute feathers etched with such fine delicacy that one wonders if it breathes beneath the cold metal.

Completing the enigma is the key, modest in appearance inside a small box—a simple sliver of cold metal resting upon a cushion of deep velvet the colour of midnight seas. Yet this unassuming object holds a mystery most profound. Upon lifting the box lid, the key performs a disappearing act, fading like morning mist in the sun's first caress, shimmering translucent before vanishing altogether. This is not mere illusion but a dance at the threshold of existence, a truth suspended between being and nothingness—waiting, perhaps, for the moment of observation to reclaim solidity from the ether.

Thus, gentle readers, I present to you not merely a book but a portal to wonder and curiosity; a relic that summons both the aesthetic and the arcane. One can scarcely resist the lure of such craftsmanship and mystery—a reminder that the most extraordinary secrets often reside behind the most beguiling doors.

The Duchess of Red Water

In an age that has already forgotten its own crimes, there lived a Duchess of remarkable beauty and yet more remarkable intellect. Her name has been effaced from courtly records—some say by her enemies, some by her own command—but her tale clings to the marshlands where she built her house, rising from the mist like a psalm turned sour.

She was said to be descended from an ancient ducal line, though none could trace the blood with certainty. The priests claimed her family held pacts with spirits; the peasants murmured she was the last of the water-witches who once ruled the fen by moonlight. Be that as it may, she dwelt apart from fashionable society, preferring the solitude of her estate where the reeds rustled like prayers half-forgotten and the lake mirrored every passing blaze of heaven and hell alike.

The house itself was strange—a palace of marble veined with black, its halls lined with portraits of women, never one of a man. The

servants who tended it swore under oath that the pictures changed with the weather: sometimes serene, sometimes weeping, and sometimes—most dreadfully—smiling with the exact smile of their mistress. Yet though they crossed themselves and whispered of devilry, not a soul would leave her service, for none could deny that the Duchess paid handsomely and reigned with eerie gentleness.

Every Sabbath she invited the villagers to her chapel—small, candlelit, hung with wreaths of herbs rather than holy garlands. There she spoke in the language of the sacred but not quite as the priests used it: “Blood is faith,” she would say in her soft voice, “and the body is holy when confessed to itself”. Many wept at her words without knowing why. The magistrate reported her sermons to the Bishop, who laughed and called her only eccentric. “A lady’s pious enthusiasm,” said he. “The poor need diversion”. But none who heard her left unchanged.

Now it happened that a young Duke, cousin to the Queen and proud as a gilded statue, came traveling through her region on his way to claim a portion of her lands—lands once pledged to his house before the wars of reform had upended half the titles in Europe. He was tall, perfumed, exceedingly confident, and as feared by his servants as beloved by the court ladies who did not know him well. Hearing that the reclusive Duchess might oppose his claim, he resolved to see her in person and win her submission by charm—or by force, should politeness fail.

The Duchess received him at dusk, attended only by two silent maids draped in grey and a flock of white ducks that glided across the reflecting pool. “Welcome, noble cousin,” said she, and her smile unsettled him more than any frown. “The night grows deep—you had best rest here till dawn, for the marsh is unkind to those who love daylight”. He agreed, finding her voice disturbingly melodic. At dinner, he jested, he boasted, and he drank; but her eyes never left him, and by midnight he began to feel himself observed not by one woman but by many—every painted face in the hall, every servant’s steady gaze.

When he rose to propose a toast, the candles fluttered and one fell to the floor, igniting a crimson stain upon the carpet. “Blood,” murmured the Duchess. “It seeks its own remembrance”. Her servants came swiftly and smothered the flame, yet the Duke swore he saw the stain pulse once before receding into the floor.

Later that night he wandered the corridors in curiosity—or in something darker—and found his way to a door of carved oak bound by iron sigils. He heard the faint sound of wings on water: ducks muttering, as though speaking secrets in a foreign tongue. He laughed softly at his own fancy, turned the latch, and entered.

What he saw none can tell in full, for his tongue was ruined by morning. The servants found him kneeling before the Duchess's private altar, his eyes broad and empty, his mouth working soundlessly like a fish drawn from the lake. Across his chest ran three neat cuts, as though the talons of a great bird had caressed him there. The Duchess, calm as any angel at requiem, ordered him to be carried to his carriage and sent away at once. "He has seen too deeply," she said. "His heart is not made for revelation."

The Duke did not survive the journey. Yet when his retainers opened the coffin that bore his body home, they found it miraculously changed: his features soft, his hair lengthened, his skin smooth as that of a maiden newly bathed. The physician declared a case of feverish degeneration; the priests muttered of punishment; the Duchess sent no defence.

Afterwards, the courtfolk laughed behind their gloves. "A witch," said one. "A libertine," said another. "A madwoman," said the rest. History wrote her down as each in turn, damning her name until it glimmered like sin in the margins of genealogy. Yet those of her household who remained swore her power never failed. The fields prospered, the women bore strong children, and men who came to scorn her left meek, their bravado melted into some quieter knowledge.

When the Duchess died—if she died at all—the lake turned red for seven nights, and the ducks were seen to swim in circles about the island chapel, crying like lovers bereaved. The Bishop banned mention of her from the pulpit. The Queen's historians expunged her lineage from the rolls of nobility. But the peasants, who forget little that touches the heart, carried on a rhyme for their children's sleep:

"By blood she prayed, by moon she stood,
She gave the bad to their own good.
By lake, by feather, flesh, and bone,
Her truth was more than kings have known."

So the tale endures in whispers. Travel through those marshes at dusk, and one may glimpse a slender shape by the water's edge, scattering crumbs to a company of white ducks. Whether ghost, saint, or only a woman too wise for her century, none can tell. But all who look too long feel something move within—the slow remembrance of what power women once held before the lies of history taught men to name it madness. And if you listen long enough, you may hear the ducks speaking still—the old language, the one the men forgot.

The Map That Owned the Men

It began, as such things often do, with a piece of paper laid flat upon a table long before any of us were born. They say the tale of the Mallard Map is older than the Duke himself—older even than the creaking library in which it was found, where the air smelled of pipe smoke and bound vellum, and the windowpanes gathered the drizzle of Surrey like tears. No one now remembers who first drew the thing, nor whether it was drawn in earnest or in jest. But drawn it was: a sheet of calfskin browned with age, upon which spread an archipelago scattered like breadcrumbs across a pale, imagined sea.

Upon the map were faint marks—dots and whirls and a spray of ink where the draughtsman’s hand had trembled. Beside one curling line, a neat hand had written Here the sands do hum with memory. Elsewhere, in crabbed script almost lost to mildew: Beware the reef that writes its name in every wave. Around the edges, like ivy on a tomb, ran a series of stanzas that might have been riddle or prayer, for their meaning was less in what they told than what they refused to say:

“Seek where the swallow’s shadow falls,
Beyond the breath of men or walls,
Beneath the wave that never dies,
Lies the light of hidden skies.”

So began the ruin and romance of a hundred men.

The first ship to set out after the Mallard Map’s promise was the Gillyflower, her sails ink-dark and her crew filled with the crackling madness that gold—or the thought of it—breeds. She found nothing but fog. Her logbook ends with a single damp sentence: We are in sight of something blue. The vessel herself was never seen again.

The next, Kingfisher’s Joy, carried both sailors and scholars, arguing from stem to stern whether the poem referred to real latitudes or purely moral ones. Their quarrels were still raging when a hurricane saw fit to settle the debate for them.

There followed the Betty-Anne, the Pilgrim’s Vote, and the ill-fated Marrow Jack, each returning fewer men than they took. Some came home grinning and half-mad, swearing they’d seen the island “winking through the mist like a drowned jewel”; others spoke no word at all and would not look upon any map thereafter.

What treasure could have driven legions to such waste? Only a story might explain, and stories have always been the most expensive coin. They said the prize was a sapphire the size of a Golden Oriole’s egg—the Blue Heart. Some had named it “a captured fragment of the

midnight sky,” others, “the frozen soul of the sea”. To those who dreamed hardest, it was not gem nor stone but proof that the world could still hold mystery, if only one were man enough to follow it to the edge.

And so, generation after generation, captains and cranks, dukes and debtors chased the same mirage—following those riddled verses like sheep after a shepherd whose pipe could not be heard.

Now there enters into the story a man whose name has ever since been bound to that map like a curse to the cursed: the Duke of Mallard. He was a fellow of quick wit and slower conscience, a patron of artists, cartographers, and legal ambiguities. One winter, he announced before witnesses that the infamous parchment was his by right of estate—for, as he noted in his own papers, the map is not the territory, but the territory is mine.

The phrase caused much sensation among lawyers, and broke the hearts of more than a few dreamers. For by that decree, all who laboured to find the treasure laboured, legally speaking, for the enrichment of the Duke—though he never boarded a ship nor risked a drop of saltwater. His claim was drawn as elegantly as the map itself, though far more fatal in its precision.

In time, men grew wary of the sea routes that led nowhere. The maps weathered and frayed; ink bled into blankness. In the glass cases of old clubs, one might still see sketches labelled Island of Unsure Promise or Bay of Sleepers, the handwriting of the hopeful slowly giving way to illegibility.

And yet, from time to time, there comes a whisper that the island is real—that its shores are strewn with the anchors of ghosted ships, and that deep beneath its coral heart lies the great sapphire still glowing, serene and merciless as truth itself.

Castle Mallard, England, in the year 1107 (and perpetually thereafter)

Once, long before England invented its weather, there came a man with more ambition than ancestry, who bought himself a castle. It was a reasonable purchase for an unreasonable sum: part roof, part rumour, several battlements inclined to fall into the moat out of sheer boredom. His lawyers told him he had acquired, quite legally, “the full appurtenances of tenure,” meaning, as it turned out, “us”.

I, Arthur, Duke, deceased since the eleventh winter of our Lord (which was a poor season for Lords), occupy the upper corridors in vapour and velvet. Contractually, I come with the property. I was not consulted on the sale—indeed, the dead rarely are. We are the pink

lettering beneath the coat of arms, curving politely beneath the heraldic duck. When the new owner arrived (Norman? Saxon? indistinct), I materialised in the banqueting hall to observe him admiring my ancestors in oil and frown.

He mistook me for draught. I let him. He filled the halls with plaster and Protestantism, both of which make excellent armour against imagination, though none against me.

His first night, he dined alone. The candles wilted. I introduced myself by rearranging his soup—Arthur Mallard, at your eternal service, Duke of Ducks, Baron of Moorish Improprieties, Lord of Things That Cannot Be Returned. He dropped his spoon with reverence, or terror, or indigestion. A fair introduction all round.

He was a self-made man; he had purchased ancestors as one purchases windows—large ones facing south. But we arrived with the house, damply and democratically. Cousin Benedict whispered along the gallery; Aunt Constance wept over the linens she no longer needed; my late horse confined himself to the lawn, emitting philosophical noises. A complete household, invisible, opinionated, faintly translucent.

We took a liking to our new landlord—he believed in Numbers, which is to say he did not believe in anything at all, which is to say he was begging to be haunted. We go where disbelief thickens. God, in His practicality, sends saints to the pious and ghosts to the practical.

Within a fortnight, he began to glow faintly—not with sanctity, no—but with the creeping blush of inheritance. He addressed his servants as if bred for it, claimed he had “an uncle in the North,” and began to refer to the ancestral chapel as ours. The transformation pleased me; possession operates both ways.

The castle, for its part, approved. Its stones like flattery; its chimney enjoys gossip. When he spoke of improvements, the walls leaned closer, listening. They adore audacity—it reminds them of siege engines.

One morning, he ordered the portraits cleaned. I experienced this as exfoliation. My face—once clouded by a century of scandal—emerged shiny, exhausted, and suddenly recognisable. He studied me, or rather, himself in me: a little nose, slightly misplaced courtesy, hints of cowardice made fashionable. I do not accuse him of resemblance, merely of inheritance.

That night, he dreamt of swimming in blood—not his own—and woke to find the moat risen higher, as if something were growing thirsty below stairs. The family, you see, on occasion likes to remind its new recruits that belonging has nutritional requirements. Ghosts must feed, and pride is a lean diet. We sip from vanity, nibble on self-importance, and take our tea in the residue of ambition. By the

second month, our purchaser provided all three daily. He strutted. He congratulated himself for his ancient lineage. He ignored me completely, which, naturally, summoned me more often.

Invisible? Only when it suits me. Death improves one's timing. The living chatter; I appear in the pauses. I prefer to haunt in a conversational tone. The man listened, at first reluctantly, then by habit, as though the voice in the curtains were a domestic device. I praised his taste, corrected his manners, shared hints from the family annals—small adjustments of style. Soon he began quoting me aloud, believing his genius newly inspired, when in truth he had simply been edited.

By midsummer, the villagers spoke of the “return of the old line.” One could see it in his stride, his sneer, the way he waved (sideways, like royalty at a lesser mirror). These tricks are hereditary. Heritage leaks.

He invited a lady to dine—a countess, lacquered with opportunity. We, all of us, attended in substance, hovering about the candelabra, supervising. She remarked upon the family resemblance between her host and certain elderly portraits; he smiled like a man listening to prophecy. I may have tilted the mirror in approval. She screamed only briefly. Such music! I had missed it.

He did not flee. That impressed me. The brave are easy to haunt; their disbelief has windows. The cowardly shut everything tight and die of drafts. He stayed, conversed, argued, dreamed—until one morning he stopped altogether, gazing into the mirror where I stood splendid and complete in my old silks. “I see you,” he said.

“Yes,” I replied, “and more of you than is comfortable.”

He smiled—an awkward smile, human still—and reached out as though to touch the frame. We are wary of touching: it confuses continuities. But I confess, something passed between us, like recognition passing for love. From that instant, the castle spoke through him. Olives fell from distant trees in his name; wells ran clear for an hour. He murmured instructions in Latin he could not read. The servants worshipped him. The countess kept her eyes closed at dinner, which is the correct condition for seeing.

So now he is mine, or rather, ours. He inhabits the portrait at dusk, the scrape of a violin after midnight. He forgets he was ever external. Nobody does not belong to this family forever. The castle owns its owners.

I drift sometimes through the orchard—what remains of it—and consider the moral, if any. None presents itself. There is a deep pleasure in arrangement without purpose—the taste of endless continuation. Think of us as an elegant sickness: hereditary, incurable, discreet.

If you should ever visit, come without scepticism; we dislike scrutiny in guests. Bring wine, bring scandal, bring a sense of time's flexibility. You may hear me in the rafters, counting. Or perhaps you'll wake to find the mirror wearing your expression.

Do not be alarmed. We are all family here.

DUCKLINGS



Once upon a time—though technically it was before time was fashionable—there existed a very small book that contained a very large amount of nonsense. It was called *The Little Book of Fitzartur Foibles*, and it was, in a sense, the universe’s first bestseller. In another sense, it was the first book ever accidentally dropped into existence by a slightly overwhelmed celestial intern with too many quills and not enough opposable thumbs.

The book arrived before the dawn of organised religion or philosophy, which is to say it arrived before responsibility had been invented. It plopped quietly onto the primordial earth, landing between a volcanically inclined mountain and a startled proto-armadillo that would later form the backbone of the concept of “saintly patience.”

From there, things got out of hand.

Every culture, when it eventually became self-aware enough to start arguing about the invisible, discovered *The Little Book of Fitzartur Foibles* in one form or another. You see, the universe is very bad at keeping secrets, and worse at filing paperwork.

In the hills of ancient China, scholars claimed it floated down the Yangtze on the shell of an irritable turtle who was tired of being immortal. The local gods declared it the *Scroll of Celestial Mistakes*, and built temples to its most confusing passage: “He who mistakes the moon for soup will only ever taste reflection”. Three dynasties later, thousands of monks argued violently about whether the moon tasted more like duck broth or tofu. Entire schools of philosophy were founded on the question, and two small kingdoms fell over an argument about garnish.

In Vietnam, the book appeared beneath a banyan tree that was already full of gossiping spirits. The fairies of the rivers—delicate creatures who survived entirely on fermented blossom nectar—claimed Fitzartur had written the world into being after getting horrendously drunk and mistaking his magical quill for a chopstick. Thus, they revered chaos as the highest order, and held six banquets a month to celebrate this important theological point. Their priests were perpetually intoxicated and therefore considered divinely inspired, which worked beautifully for centuries.

In the heart of Africa, it was said that the book was not read but danced. A great chief once declared that the only way to comprehend Fitzartur's meaning was to drum it into the earth until it made sense. Generations of griots memorised its verses through rhythm, and some say the first thunder was simply the sky's attempt to keep time. When the gods became jealous, they sent termites to eat the book, but the termites became enlightened halfway through and formed their own religion involving a very small sun and the daily worship of interesting twigs.

Meanwhile in India, the sages of the early world discovered the book half-buried in the roots of a peepal tree, next to a snake who had opinions on nearly everything. Fitzartur's text was declared to contain precisely seven million divine truths, or possibly two, depending on one's mood. The gods, ever fond of a good debate, conscripted entire families of elephants to memorise differing interpretations. Rituals sprang up demanding that worshippers chant, meditate, and then immediately contradict themselves for balance. Thus was born the sacred doctrine of "You Might Be Right, But Let's Argue Anyway."

Oddly enough, when a much later and extremely self-important book called *The Bible* turned up, it caused great confusion, chiefly because half its stories were already in *The Little Book of Fitzartur Foibles*. The Creation story was there (twice), along with the parts about the floods, some suspiciously familiar plagues, and a rather long chapter on how not to build a golden calf because it upsets the neighbours. Scholars debated whether the newer tome was a sequel, an adaptation, or an unauthorised fanfiction.

Angels were consulted. They declined to comment. Demons were consulted. They charged consultancy fees. And mankind, doing what it does best, decided to hold global conferences that produced precisely no answers but an impressive amount of paperwork.

Some centuries later, a particularly ambitious monk insisted that *The Little Book of Fitzartur Foibles* should be officially recognised as "Pre-Biblical Scripture," which caused riots, reforms, three miracles, and one unfortunate incident involving a talking pineapple who claimed to be a reincarnation of Fitzartur himself. The pineapple was later canonised as St. Juicy of the Tropics, patron saint of improbable theology.

As for the book, it vanished, as meaningful relics always do, last seen being used as a coaster in a wizard's tavern somewhere beyond time. People still whisper of it, somewhere between myth and madness, that original Little Book that taught humanity the most fundamental truth of all: that the divine, when left unattended, behaves exactly like the rest of us—absurdly, passionately, and with absolutely no idea what it's doing.

2AD: Ducks in a pond

There came a curious moment in the grand palace of the King of Persia, a ruler famed not only for his vast lands but also for his insatiable thirst for knowledge—almost as insatiable as a duck’s appetite for breadcrumbs by the royal pond. One day, he summoned the famously wise Greek philosopher Epictetus, a man known for untangling the threads of human life and the cosmos, like a diligent duck preening its feathers in the sun.

The king, wishing to understand more than merely how to rule or where to find the best duck ponds in his kingdom, commanded Epictetus to explain the nature of life, the universe and why ducks quack.

“O King, the path from life to death is not simply the fluttering of wings or the passing of breath. This is no mere animal twitch, it is a grand cosmic dance choreographed by a nautilus flowing through time’s endless river, where existence itself folds upon itself like the ripples created by a duck paddling relentlessly across the water seeking its supper. Life and death are but quacks echoed in this infinite rhythm, replicating existence not through flesh alone but through time’s ceaseless renewal.”

Envisioning ducks gliding serenely across the waters of eternity, the king pondered the philosopher’s words. Observers tell us that this moment was remembered not for precise scientific proof nor for exact explanation, but for the way it wove wisdom and wonder, much like a flock of ducks weaving effortlessly through the morning mist, into a tale of life’s grand mysteries.

Such is the story, both learned and a little bit quacky, passed down like the lore of ancient times between Persian kings and Greek philosophers, reminding us that sometimes the universe itself might just be a bit like a pond full of ducks.

17AD: The Marchant of Mu: A Fairy Tale for Decadent Gentlemen

Far beyond the charted oceans, beyond the monsoons where compasses falter and maps dissolve, lies the floating realm of Mu—half isle, half mirage. Sailors would swear that it rises and sinks with the breath of the world. On clear days they see its mountains gleam like mirrors; by starlight it vanishes, leaving only the scent of fruit and laughter on the water.

In that ambivalent paradise the air itself has manners: the wind bends graciously round the trees; rain arrives perfumed. And there, in the golden age of wonder, lived the first Marchant of Mu, called Felix—adventurer, poet, and (whispered some) the legitimate child of Pan.

Felix was, from earliest youth, a creature without solemnity. He wore wit as other men wear armour. His smile was a declaration of independence, and his body a kind of hymn to sunlight. A lover of men and of nature in equal measure, he could no more resist beauty than a bird can resist the open air. Yet there was in him no vice, only a curiosity which refused extinction.

He spoke in riddles, those playful labyrinths of words he called “realities’ disguises.” When asked what he loved most, he answered, “Anything that returns one’s gaze.” To some that meant vanity; to others, faith. He preferred to leave them puzzled while he danced away, pipe in hand, to teach the rocks how to echo.

One evening, wandering through the violet forests that surround Mu’s capital, Felix found a beast as large as a lion yet gentler than a lamb. It wept in sleep. Beside it lay the broken fragments of a silver mirror.

“Why dost thou weep?” asked Felix.

“Because”, said the beast, “when I gaze upon myself, I dream another creature—fairer, freer—and when I wake, I am I again.”

Felix smiled. “Therein lies thy blessing. For if thou wert fully awake thou wouldst never know longing, and without longing even paradise would dull.”

So he took up the shards and, arranging them upon the grass, bade the beast admire its reflection in a thousand pieces. “Behold thy truth,” he said. “It is not unity but variety that makes thee beautiful.”

And from that hour the beast ceased weeping and began to sing; its song was so clear that sailors mistook it for wind in rigging. Thus Felix taught Mu that virtue is no single mirror, but a thousand.

In the month of the honey-moths, a festival was held upon the Yellow Lake, whose surface caught the moon like a plate of molten gold. Felix presided, crowned with vine and water-lilies, surrounded by companions of great laughter and greater limbs. They danced upon rafts, instruments clanging, torches shedding petals of flame that perfumed the air.

A missionary once shipwrecked among them cried out that such revel was sin, that labour and restraint alone ennoble the soul. Felix answered with a bow: “Good sir, in Mu we labour only for pleasure—which is to say, honestly. When joy becomes duty, the gods themselves applaud.” Then he took the missionary’s hand and drew him into the

dance, and by dawn the poor man had forgotten both sermon and Sabbath.

Later came a hermit from another shore, austere and desiring proof of reality. Felix introduced him to a fawn of remarkable civility who could quote philosophy between bites of fig. All noon they argued whether the world was dream or substance. At sunset the philosopher dozed; the fawn vanished.

When he woke, only Felix sat beside him, holding one of the fawn's golden hairs. "Was it a dream?" the man murmured.

"Doubtless", said Felix, tucking the hair into his own curls, "and therefore the more real. Dreams are reality unclothed."

The philosopher returned home proclaiming madness as revelation.

At the close of his days (though none can say he ever truly aged), Felix walked by a lagoon filled with swans—all male, all gliding in immaculate contention. He loved to watch how they quarrelled for grace rather than for gain. When a traveller mocked them as unnatural, Felix replied, "Nothing is more natural than what rejoices in its own reflection." That jest became the island's motto.

At last, growing tired of being worshipped, the Marchant of Mu stepped onto a ship woven from reeds and sailed toward a horizon no one perceived. Only a trail of perfume, laughter, and unfinished poems remained. Some say he became the spirit of the island itself; others, that he walks still among us whenever men find dream preferable to duty.

Virtue may wear peacock feathers as easily as sackcloth; that moralists mistake exhaustion for piety; that labour suits the strong and leisure perfects the wise; that life, radiant and excessive, is the only faith worth professing. And if this be decadence, then decadence is Eden regained—not corrupt, but conscious; not idle, but alive.

550: Eadwulf Mallard

In the days long past, in that shadowed time of the Dark Ages in Old England when Mab, the Queen of the Fairies, still wandered the earth, there lived a powerful wizard named Eadwulf Mallard, powerful and learned in his own right. Eadwulf was known among the scattered tribes and hidden folk for his knowledge of the fabled flora and fauna that thronged the land, creatures whispered only in cautiously told stories.

Eadwulf knew of the sickly bluebell that bloomed under the moon's pale gaze, the ghostly luminescent fox that moved without sound across the heath, and the wild griffin that nested high among forgotten cliffs, guardian of ancient treasure and mystery. He was said to command spells of the wind and rain, to call forth fire from water, and to weave

charms for protection against the black dogs that prowled in the twilight, harbingers of doom.

Throughout his days, Eadwulf encountered supernatural beings of great wonder and terror—the sly puca with its changing visage, the mournful banshee whose wails foretold death, and even the elusive horned king who ruled a subterranean realm of shadows. These encounters enriched his spells and wisdom, leaving him content with the measure of power he wielded and the respect he commanded.

Yet, one day, amidst his dusty tomes and stirring incense, Eadwulf chanced upon mention of a spell unlike any other—a spell of self-obliteration, a ritual so potent and final that it would erase the caster from all existence. Intrigued but wary, Eadwulf sought the rite and contemplated its meaning. He marvelled that a man might command not only life and death in others but the absolute vanishing of himself.

570: The Giant

There once lived a giant. A man of such high stature and unsurpassing ugliness that none dared approach him. As is often that way in such matters, this giant had stood still, *locus standi*, for so many centuries that those who dwelled nearest had named him “menhir velt”. Viewed as he was from leagues’ distant, he stood as testament to time’s harsh currents that sped across a plane few chose to cross.

Such was his menacing aspect and the tales that grew up about him. He stood tall, his head bowed as though he was contemplating the single shaft of silver that rose from what might be supposed to have once been his finger. His hat, perhaps caught in an unseen yet violent wind or crashed upon by the strike of lightening, lay to one side, forgotten to his sight.

The field in which he stood—edged all around with a farrago of villages and castles was rimmed by forests too that would not step lightly into his sight but fighting, always, to avoid the woodman’s axe—was broad and flat, enfolded and tussocked. None dared tread near him but viewed as a landmark around which all was centred. Such perhaps is the fate of such monoliths.

One day a lad, a fool in many eyes, became lost in this velde and it being one of those dark and stormy nights, told too often as a harbinger of misfortune, saw in a flash of lightening that stroke of steel and leaned his pace towards it, hoping to catch his bearings.

Had that giant been merely watching for such an innocent, adventurous child to approach? Who can say? Yet, when that boy finally clambered up and onto that outstretched finger and grasped that steel plate as his only anchor in the gusts of rain and thunder, when he

stood tall and sought a refuge in any direction. When he tugged so slightly to steady himself in that blustering gale, the silvery steel worked loose, like a splinter released from beneath skin.

And the giant disappeared, as dust to dust, departing in such haste at his final delivery, he forgot his hat.

1001: The Man and the Sands Between

There was, once, a man who wandered into a country that appeared and disappeared according to the hour of the day. It was not mapped nor named, for no cartographer had dared stay long enough to draw its boundaries. The ground there was not firm but pale and fluid, made of sand so fine it shimmered like powdered glass. Each grain seemed alive, sliding with miniature resolve; together they breathed, forming dunes that shifted as clouds do, imperceptibly yet entirely.

Into this mutable place the man walked, seeking neither fortune nor revelation but something quieter—rest, perhaps, or the proof of his own endurance. He carried no compass, and in that land none would have helped him, for its directions were obedient only to the wind. The east might become north before the next breath, and south might melt soundlessly into the idea of west. The man did not mind. He had travelled many years across more substantial worlds and found their certainties oppressive. Here, at least, everything was undecided.

He walked until his footprints became indistinguishable from the surface, as though each step confessed its own futility. By night, the sands glowed faintly with their own light, like the residue of vanished stars. He sat to rest upon a hummock that swelled beneath him, and found that it rose and fell with a rhythm like breathing. He imagined for a moment that he sat upon some enormous creature sleeping lightly beneath the skin of the world. The thought neither frightened nor reassured him. It merely was.

At dawn the wind changed, and with it the sand began to move more insistently, as if remembering a forgotten duty. The man rose, though he could not tell whether he was sinking or the earth itself was climbing around him. From the distance came two colours—one white, one black—slowly resolving themselves into shimmer and shadow. They were not shapes precisely, but directions of being; one towards warmth, the other towards coolness; one toward pulse, the other toward stillness. Between them the sand wavered like a mind hesitating between two words.

“Which way shall I walk?” the man asked, though he knew the sands were deaf. Yet the whiteness brightened in answer, while the shadow grew denser until the air thickened with opposing invitations. A sense

of division tugged at him, a pressure that was neither pain nor longing but something crystalline: the feeling of being understood by forces too vast to name.

He realised then that what pressed upon him from either side was not command but recognition. The two presences were Life and Death, though not as adversaries but as correspondents, exchanging him between them like a letter whose message neither would unfold. Between their attention the sands grew restless, roiling beneath his feet as though each grain sought to declare its allegiance.

He tried to step back, but the concept of distance dissolved. The effort of will sank like a stone in water. Breathing became difficult; the air seemed thickened with invisible intention. He thought, absurdly, of the clocks that ticked far away in ordinary parlours, of polished boots lined neatly at an inn's hearth, of morning coffee cooling beside folded newspapers. He wondered whether the ticking of a clock were the heartbeat of Time, or merely its polite apology.

The sands continued to shift. To stand still required motion, for the surface beneath him slipped away with each instant. He moved not to advance but to remain. Somewhere behind him—if direction still meant anything—he heard a sound like the rustle of silk: perhaps it was wind, perhaps the faint laughter of the invisible poles measuring his composure. He was conscious only of how evenly everything balanced—birth tipping toward decay, decay turning to renewal, and himself poised like a thread stretched across the loom of possibility.

For an interval that might have been a second or an epoch, all sensation ceased to distinguish itself. The sands and the man and the twin immensities became a single vibration, a silence humming at the edge of audibility. In it he felt neither fear nor joy, for both were too heavy to survive there.

Then the wind shifted once more, as if deciding nothing after all, and he found that the dunes lay calm and featureless around him. Life had withdrawn into the horizon's pallor; Death into a shadow no deeper than his own. Between them he stood, unclaimed, the sand clinging delicately to his skin. He might have laughed, or whispered, but no sound would have known what name to take. The desert shimmered, poised perfectly upon its own unknowing.

He stooped and scooped a handful of sand, watching it slip away through the gaps of his fingers. Each grain caught the sun in miniature: a world glowing for the brief moment of its fall. When the last grain had gone, he saw that his palm bore no trace of its touch, yet it felt infinitely heavier.

From somewhere unseen came a voice without direction, perhaps his own: There are two kinds of stillness—the one before breathing, and the one after.

He could not tell to which stillness he now belonged.

And the sands, hearing nothing to contradict them, went on shifting gently around his feet.

1170: The Tragic and Sublime History of Saint Anastasia Germoglio of Mallard

It was recorded, in one of those medieval annals so rich in superstition and sincerity, that Anastasia Germoglio was born under an eclipse so profound that even the shepherds, who pretended indifference to heavenly events, stood mutely watching their sheep forget the difference between night and day. Her mother, a woman of unequal beauty and unequal temper, declared upon her daughter's first cry, "She will disturb the heavens; the sky will remember her."

This, as the later chroniclers observed, was not a hopeful remark.

When Anastasia reached her twelfth year—the age at which saints and tragedies begin—a pilgrim came through Mallard, England, professing to have seen visions. Such pilgrims were common, and Mallard, then as now, had a taste for prophecy, since no one there ever did what was practical unless it bore the glamour of doom. The pilgrim declared that he had seen a falling stone, a shattering, and the words "By weight shall she be ended". The family, being of modest piety but extravagant imagination, concluded at once that Anastasia would perish from a falling object.

In another time or place, a simpler family might have confined her to a cottage with a sturdy roof, but the Germoglios, being of refined dread, took counsel from poets and clerics alike and resolved that safety lay only in openness. "If the danger falls from above," they reasoned, "then let her live where there is no 'above'—save heaven". Thus began Anastasia's long devotion to the open field.

She became a solitary flower amid the meadows of Mallard—always standing alone, always beneath the sky. She slept under tented silk that trembled with sunrise, and her attendants, who took turns to keep watch, remarked that she spoke often to clouds as though they were colleagues in her safety. In spring she was garlanded by the village, for prophecy is irresistible to the provincial mind; one likes to adorn what one secretly pities.

Anastasia herself bore her strangeness with a serene conceit. In this she resembled the heroines of a later century—loving her own complexity more than she feared her own demise. She would say, with

an intelligent lift of the chin, “Men die for want of foresight; women die for excess of it. We are all the victims of our knowledge.”

Her hair—here the chroniclers differ—either fell until she could sit upon it, or vanished altogether after a prolonged fast, for asceticism was the fashion among doomed women. The more reliable record states that she shaved her head, fearing lice, vanity, and confusion in equal measure. Thus she came to resemble a benediction carved from marble, pale and unguarded, her scalp gleaming like an idea too bright for comfort.

So it was that, one unremarkable May morning in 1170, she stood once more in the meadow. The day was serene; Providence is always most patient when calamity requires precision. An eagle soared high above—the same creature, some said, that had been trained by hunters on the Mallard estate. Whether divine accident or tragic symmetry, the bird mistook the light upon her bare head for the rounded gleam of a rock.

The eagle descended, its pinions dark as judgment, and in its claws a tortoise—the bridegroom of destiny. From an altitude known only to myth, it let the creature fall. The tortoise descended, innocent as fate, and Anastasia was struck down on the very ground that had seemed her refuge. “Thus,” wrote one witness, “the prophecy was complete by its very contradiction. She fled from walls, and died of the sky.”

Through Mallard and the shires beyond spread the story of the woman whom even prudence betrayed. Poets wrote of her as “the Saint of the Open Air,” and lovers, watching clouds, thought of her both fondly and with relief that tragedy had chosen another.

Twenty years later, when devotion had matured into bureaucracy, the Roman Church sanctified her. It was felt that such a death could not be secular. To die absurdly, it was reasoned, is often to die magnificently. Thus Saint Anastasia Germoglio was inscribed among the blessed, her miracles being chiefly moral: she turned a warning into a parable, a precaution into a myth.

Soon an order of nuns arose in her name—the Sisters of Saint Anastasia Germoglio, she of the Open Sky. Their convent was built not of stone but of habit. Officially located on the far edge of the Mallard Estate, it possessed only a nominal nunnery, a structure the sisters refused to enter. They worshipped instead in the open fields Anastasia had loved, their prayers interrupted by wind, rain, and the occasional startled pheasant.

Their peculiar devotions reflected the Saint’s story. They revered both tortoises and eagles—the agents of her undoing—as dual symbols of humility and power. “For,” as Mother Abbess Clarentine explained,

“the eagle reminds us that exaltation leads to error, and the tortoise reminds us that wisdom travels heavily but lands well.”

The Mallard Estate’s current lord found their excursions inconvenient. The sisters, in their meditative wanderings, frequently strayed across the course of the hunt. Riders complained that their hounds hesitated before these white-hooded figures murmuring to the clouds. Yet the sisters were tolerated, for every English estate must have its local sanctity as well as its scandal.

Today, if one visits those green fields near Mallard, one may still see a weathered memorial: a stone tortoise beneath a bronze eagle, forever suspended above it. The inscription reads:

Here lies Anastasia Germoglio, who fled Fortune’s shadow by living in the sun.

She who feared the falling world became its fulcrum.

To avoid her fate, she walked in fields; and there, the heavens remembered her.

The nuns kneel there at dawn, reciting their curious creed:

“Blessed be the falling, which completes the flight;
blessed be the shell, which yields to light.”

And above them, on certain mornings, an eagle drifts over the mist like a moral revisited.

1181: The Improbable History of Eudaimonia the Unwise but Unreasonably Happy

In the rolling hills of the Principality of Ambiguë-les-Bains, there once lived a man named Eudaimonia Flossington-Hume, who was so outrageously contented with existence that it caused quite a scandal in polite society.

From an early age, he showed every sign of developing into the sort of person respectable people avoid at dinner parties because he kept smiling at the soup as though it had told him something uplifting. When other children were being tutored in deportment, Latin, and the correct methods of suppressing inconvenient emotions, Eudaimonia preferred to lie under trees, stare philosophically at clouds, and cheerfully shout advice to passing butterflies. When asked what he intended to do with his life, he replied, “Whatever happens to insist,” which is not the kind of answer that reassures guardians.

His parents, Lord Reverence and Lady Reflection Flossington-Hume, did everything they could to ensure their son amounted to

something dependable, such as a civil servant, a philosopher, or a tax-deductible disaster. They sent him to the Academy of Moral Restraint, where young men of breeding were taught that the surest way to happiness was to stop enjoying things.

Within a week, Eudaimonia had been expelled for excessive cheerfulness, improper whistling, and “a general attitude of unlicensed delight”. He cheerfully thanked the headmaster for the educational experience, requested a reference, and went home through the gardens to admire the dandelions, which he insisted were far superior to roses on account of their democratic tendencies.

Everyone agreed something had to be done about him. It is scandalous enough to meet a man who enjoys his breakfast, but Eudaimonia made a hobby of it. He savoured eggs with the passion of a poet and buttered his toast as if each slice were a triumph over the disappointments of history. He was perpetually astonished, delighted, and untroubled by the world’s general disorder.

People whispered that he must be simple. Some thought him mad. Yet, in a display of appalling bad taste, life rewarded him spectacularly. His garden grew voluptuously, his hens laid eggs with moral conviction, and his wine cellar glowed like an apology from Heaven.

He laughed easily, forgave everyone who annoyed him (which was everyone), and spoke enthusiastically to strangers even about topics such as the weather, municipal drainage, and the meaning of happiness—subjects one only discusses when bent on social extinction.

One day, a circle of very serious philosophers, recently assembled by the town’s mayor to improve the tenor of thinking in the region, approached him. They had heard rumours that Eudaimonia was thriving without suffering, and naturally regarded this as a personal affront. Their leader, Professor Mordant Grimshaw, wore an expression of perpetual gloom that could smother candles.

“Eudaimonia,” said Grimshaw, “we have observed your conduct with horror. You show no signs of anguish, restraint, contradiction, or fashionable despair. Surely you are at war with yourself in private?”

“Not especially,” said Eudaimonia, smiling so warmly that two pigeons attempted to nest in his hat.

“You are in a permanent state of cheer!” cried the Professor. “Unphilosophical! Surely you confront disappointment?”

“Oh yes,” said Eudaimonia. “Quite often. But then I seem to recover rather quickly. I find disappointment is only truly effective if nurtured, and I’m terrible at garden work.”

Grimshaw trembled. “And yet you endure criticism calmly?”

“Why not? It’s so generous of people to help me discover how much I irritate them.”

The philosophers retreated in confusion. For weeks they argued and scribbled furiously on blackboards, trying to develop the theoretical framework for someone being perfectly happy by accident. They debated whether Eudaimonia was a miracle, a moral glitch, or an elaborate prank on the universe.

Meanwhile, Eudaimonia continued living splendidly. His house, full of warm light and eccentric furniture, overflowed with the impermeable optimism of cats in sunny windows. Mirrors hung slightly askew because he liked the way they leaned as if admiring themselves. His front door stuck upon occasion, which he found comforting. “All good things,” he said, “require persuasion.”

When visitors entered his library, they found it filled with books alphabetised according to whim and pleasantness of title. He read widely and erratically, often two or three at once, and left each one happier than before, even the tragic novels. “If everyone suffered so elegantly,” he said once, “there would be no need for holidays.”

He had romances, of course—enormous, impractical ones that ended amicably with thank-you letters. Suitors despaired of him because he simply refused to brood. The most he ever said after heartbreak was, “How marvellous it is that one can still feel things so vividly!”

As years passed, Eudaimonia confounded every expectation. He became prosperous by an evolutionary process no one could trace. He smiled his way through bureaucracies, outlived several accountants, and maintained a complexion so healthy that other men found it offensive.

Finally, a petition was drawn up by the philosophers’ guild demanding that he either explain himself or stop being so obviously successful without participating in the grand enterprise of moral improvement. He invited them all to tea.

It was a spectacular affair. The cakes were indecently seductive; the wine made even the glummet theorist metaphysical; and the conversation drifted, as conversation always does when lubricated by good pastry, to the nature of existence.

“My good friends,” said Eudaimonia, raising his glass, “I admire your dedication to being sensible, but perhaps it’s an overrated pastime. You claim to pursue balance, calm, and self-mastery. Splendid qualities, I’m sure—like teaspoons or wallpaper paste. But I find life requires a certain amount of unwise enthusiasm if it’s to remain interesting.”

“You mean,” said Professor Grimshaw suspiciously, “you indulge passions?”

“I am practically upholstered with them,” said Eudaimonia cheerfully.

“Then how do you avoid ruin?”

“By enjoying it when it arrives,” said Eudaimonia. “I find disaster most instructive when taken with jam.”

At that precise moment—history’s punctuation mark—something improbable happened. The ceiling cracked, the philosophers gasped, and a shaft of golden light poured down upon Eudaimonia, who—being no respecter of cosmic stage effects—used it to locate the sugar bowl. When the light faded, he remained exactly as before, though possibly even more splendidly himself.

From that day forth, the philosophers grudgingly admitted that systems of virtue, moderation, and self-denial occasionally produced the opposite of what they intended: namely, smug satisfaction. Whereas Eudaimonia, who had possessed no system beyond spontaneous delight, went on happily disproving solemn people simply by existing.

He lived absurdly long, contentedly eccentric, and died of excessive amusement at the age of one hundred and twenty-four during a toast to his own health—a performance that earned him posthumous membership in every philosophical society solely on the grounds that nobody could rationally account for him.

And so the world learned a valuable lesson, albeit not the one it expected: that some men flourish not because they suppress their passions, but because they serve them tea.



In the time when the moon was newer and the maps had only recently discovered how to curve at the edges, there stood the Duchy of Perpetua, a small but unreasonably confident realm wedged between three mountain ranges and its own sense of self-importance. Its capital, Gravelotte, was built from mirror-stone that remembered every face that ever looked into it, which is why most citizens preferred to live elsewhere. The dukes of this realm were proud, prodigiously hereditary, and prone to melodious extinction. All that remains of them now is a library no librarian has survived cataloguing, a faint aftertaste of grandeur in the rain, and, of course, their shield.

The shield was a vast affair of burnished bronze and mild opinion, upon which was wrought: a crowned gryphon, rampant, with its right paw clasping a crown, its left gripping a cowrie shell, and beneath it a sword lying flat, as though resting from centuries of narrative labour. Around these items shimmered the motto *Perpetuum Excellentiam*—“Excellence Forever” or, as the court jester translated, “Bragging Rights Without Expiry.”

The gryphon itself was of such sublime detail that artists despaired of finishing it. It gleamed with repainted feathers, its eye set with a gem that occasionally winked at passing historians. The coat of arms hung over the ducal dais where it presided with the solemn, smug dignity of an elder god mildly tipsy on its own symbolism.

In the oldest chronicles, the heralds argued endlessly about what the beast meant. Some said the gryphon represented the Duke's power across borders, for Perpetua extended so far that its maps met themselves coming back the other way. Others swore the creature was purely decorative, a kind of divine doodle commissioned by a bored demiurge. The cowrie shell perplexed everyone. Some insisted it was a symbol of fertility, others that it had fallen in by accident from the sea-mage's hat during the blessing ceremony, and one priest spent a lifetime claiming it foretold taxation by mollusc.

The sword's significance varied seasonally. In wartime it was the Sword of Victory; in peace it was the Sword of Caution; and on alternate Mondays it was simply That Thing We Must Keep Polished. The crown the gryphon held aloft was likewise ambiguous—possibly a trophy, possibly a spare. The dukes liked to hint they owned so many that one had to be stored off-head.

Of the motto, poets were less kind. "Perpetual Excellence," they sneered, "is chiefly noted for its short duration". And indeed the ducal line, famous for surviving plagues, invasions, and poetry readings, eventually dwindled due to the more prosaic hazard of bad decisions compounded by dramatic exit speeches.

Yet for all that, the shield endured. For when mortals fade, symbols have the decency to stay put—particularly those etched in metals possessed of memories and mild resentment.

Now it is whispered that every crest, if stared at long enough, begins to breathe. If you watch the Perpetuan gryphon by the flicker of candlelight, its wing twitches, its claws stretch languidly, and the tiny flame in its garnet eye flares like a sigh. At times the sword hums softly, remembering old duels; the cowrie shivers with the echo of tides from a vanished sea; and the dangling crown spins a little, as though the gryphon were thinking, Perhaps just one more kingdom for the road.

And around Perpetua itself, where the forests reign ungoverned and the mountains still gossip about geography, the creatures of the mythic age continue wandering as if the old world had never ended.

The dragons are the largest and least confidential of these: long-tailed, extravagantly feathered, they roost in abandoned towers and lecture passing travellers on hoarding as a spiritual discipline. The gryphons, cousins to the one on the shield, hunt lightning and gossip,

devouring brimstone from quarries so vast their echoes are apprenticed to thunder.

There are pixies with poor manners, fauns addicted to opinion, wolves that recite genealogy, and wyverns of literary ambition. Unicorns wander the vales dressed in melancholy and long hair; manticores demand tolls in anecdotes; and the last of the sphinxes, old beyond disbelief, charges two riddles for every answer and rarely keeps the change.

The seas are ruled by merfolk, who write splendid but soggy verse; satyrs throw concerts in unsuitable weather; and down along the estuaries glide serpents whose voices can untie knots. In the western marshes, the trees themselves debate philosophy until autumn interrupts.

Beyond the mountains plod turtles so vast their shells have abbeys built upon them, and fleets of tiny tortoises that ferry miniature holy men in circles of quiet exasperation. There are, of course, rarer beings—a tribe of hairy homonids who reinvent the wheel each midsummer, phantasmal felines that vanish when complimented, demonic dogs restricted by treaty to local curses, serious spiders who weave the history of the realm into webs of alarming accuracy, and laughing baboons who attend their exhibitions.

High above, whenever the dusk grows dignified enough, a phoenix unfolds itself in an argument of wings and proceeds to incinerate its previous issues for quality control.

All of these, the wise declare, exist because the shield remembers them. Every beast etched in that heraldic design is said to have crept out of the metal one feverish night when the last Duke whispered a wish for “Eternal Greatness... or something equally prestigious”. The universe, as usual, took him literally but lacked editorial skill.

So now, in the very centre of the ruined ducal hall, the shield still hangs—shimmering faintly, like pride unable to admit defeat—while armies of myths and blunders roam the world it accidentally imagined. Scholars who have gazed upon it for too long swear the gryphon smirks slightly, as though it knows that kingdoms, like crowns, are best when surplus; that power, when possessed, grows tiresome; that excellence, contrary to motto, is always temporary; and that perhaps the truest story any crest can tell is of a creature magnificently busy holding what it does not need, trampling what it cannot use, crowned, still clutching another crown, and proud of both.

And so the duchy endures only as an echo of its own ambition—a fairyland cobbled together by its own emblem—myth devouring history, and a gryphon still glinting through the centuries as if to say, Perpetuum, yes... but let’s keep it interesting, shall we?

1217: The Duck That Wouldn't Waddle

There once was a pond on the estate of Lord Aylmer of Belmarsh, whose grounds lay wide and gloomy under the grey skirts of the Chiltern Hills. The estate was noble, the family less so, and the pond—well, the pond was older than both. No one knew what filled it: rain, tears, or the seepage of forgotten things. But it mirrored the moon faithfully, which everyone agreed was a suspicious habit for water.

In that pond lived a duck of singular disposition. He would not waddle. Not for grain, not for gossip, and certainly not for God. His name, as reported by the gardener's boy who claimed to have heard it whispered by the reeds, was Branfoot. He swam all day and all night, carving circles in the mirrored surface until the whole pond seemed a spinning coin between heaven and the bog.

"Why does he never step ashore?" asked the cook's daughter, wringing her apron.

"Because", said the old groundskeeper, "his feet are promised elsewhere".

No one understood what he meant, which was just as well.

Lord Aylmer was a man much given to improvement. He drained the marshes (they refused), straightened the stream (it curved again by morning), and planted a formal garden which grew only cabbages, no matter what was sown. The tenants said the land remembered who had bled on it and had opinions accordingly. Lord Aylmer refused to listen to peasants or ponds.

"Nature", he declared, "is a servant, not a voice."

"Then she's a servant who talks back", muttered the butler, and would have been dismissed had the house not already been emptying itself of staff through less voluntary means.

Of late, those who strayed by the pond after dark reported hearing slapping sounds—not the ordinary, genteel plop of waterfowl, but a rhythmic endurance of splashing, tireless and patient. Branfoot swam circles still, moon after moon, through frost and thunder, through christenings and funerals, as if the world beyond the water had been annulled.

One bitter December night, when the fog hung like cold wool on the hedgerows, the stable-boy saw movement on the pond: a phantom brightness under the surface. It glowed faint and green, like old coins or church glass. In it, he said, he saw eyes—not reflecting, but remembering. The duck glided round and round, his feathers clinging wetly to his breast.

When dawn came, winter bit harder. The pond froze halfway out, yet Branfoot swam in the centre where the ice would not form. The boy, bold with curiosity and hunger for tale-telling, crept close. There he saw that the duck's feet no longer looked like proper feet at all but darkened stubs, as though the pond were eating him an inch at a time.

By Candlemas, his legs had vanished altogether.

The villagers held council by the fire of the Crown and Lute Inn.

Some said he had been cursed for pride—refusing the law of earth that ordains every creature must come ashore sometime or other. Others said he was a messenger from the deep fountain beneath the hill, where no water runs clear. The widow Ferris said he was her late husband reincarnate, “and serves him right for never coming home”.

Whatever the case, the pond thickened with unease.

Dogs wouldn't drink there; even the gnats seemed to hover respectfully, as if afraid of being dissolved.

On the sixteenth day of Lent, with the first tentative thaw of the year, Branfoot swam slower, spiralling inward. Witnesses later argued whether the circle he traced was perfect. Some saw devotion; others decay.

He drifted to the middle, where no reflections showed, and there—so the housekeeper swore—he raised his head once, opened his beak as if to quack a sermon, and slipped under.

No splash. No ring of ripples. Only the faintest sigh of mud accepting an argument already lost.

When the pond was dragged (for Lord Aylmer tolerated no mysteries near his estate), they found nothing: no feathers, no bones, no duck. Only, in the drag-net, a clump of webbed skin like black lace, and an object which the steward insisted was no more than a stone, though it beat faintly, like a heart that had forgotten its use.

In the summer of that same year—1217, when the land at last lay quiet after many treaty-signings and hangings—the estate's new master dined by the pond, having been assured the curse (if any) was settled. But the servants whispered that, when the wind paused, one could still hear a ghostly paddling beneath the lilies.

Children born in Belmarsh after midsummer were said to come into the world with webbed toes. The midwives bound them tightly and recited the Psalm of Unbinding, lest they too forget how to walk upon the earth.

And still, the pond remains; even now the reeds stir when there is no breeze. Those who linger near it swear that something unseen turns slowly beneath the surface, a steady circling motion, endless as regret. For the duck that would not waddle learned too late that the waters

claimed what they cherished, and feet made for earth must one day rest upon it.

1311: The Crimson Mother

In a vale where the mists clung low and the moon rose like a wound that would not heal, there dwelt a woman once fair, now formidable in both wisdom and wrath. Age had not softened her but honed her to an edge; she had tasted the sweetness of love and discovered its rot beneath. Her daughters were the only balm to her solitude—three creatures of surpassing loveliness, whom she cherished with a devotion that shadowed upon the unnatural.

The eldest was bronzed as the ripened leaf and strong of limb; the second pale as frozen light, a spirit more than mortal; and the youngest of golden hair whose laughter could raise the veins of the dead. To strangers they were maidens; to their mother, they were instruments of long calculation. For she had grown wise in her years, too wise to let the world's masculine appetite devour those she had borne in anguish.

"Men," she would say, "love as hawks love doves—by striking". And each time she spoke it, the candlelight shivered.

Now it happened that she made her house a place of enchantment, draped in silks that seemed to breathe, perfumed with herbs that veiled the senses and thawed the soul. When the harvest waned and the forest reeked of dying leaves, she rode forth one night into the township, attired in velvets the colour of dried blood. Her eyes beneath the veil gleamed like a prophet's in ecstasy, and though her lips were withered they smiled with promises beyond mortal honour.

At a banquet among the town's nobility, her gaze fixed upon a prince—youthful, fragrant, and splendidly careless, with the beauty of one who has never known refusal. She spoke softly at his side, her voice a dark caress.

"My lord," said she, "would it please you to behold what the moon envies and the devil himself would covet? Three daughters I possess, exquisite as dreams unconfessed—one of bronze and warmth, one of silver and chill delight, and one of gold whose touch dissolves the soul from reason. Visit them if you dare. Each will grant you one night, and one night only. Yet beware, for when the cock cries, you must be gone, untasted by daylight, unsouled by guilt."

The prince, pride-blind and drunk upon her perfume, bowed low. "By your beauty's oath, lady, I shall obey."

She smiled—a slow, sorrowful curve that betrayed no mercy—and bade him follow to the house wherein none but daughters dwelt.

There, his nights unfurled like fevered scripture. The first chamber glowed with bronze and candle-smoke; the maiden's skin shimmered with sweat and spice. She sang to him in a language half prayer, half temptation, and when she kissed him, he felt a pulse of strange life pass from her mouth to his. The next night the silver daughter received him amidst silken veils that rippled like moonlit water; her breath was cold, her eyes lit by hunger blanched of pity. He thrilled and shuddered by turns, unable to distinguish pleasure from devotion. On the third night he came weakened, yet eager still, and found the golden daughter waiting bedecked with flowers of poisonous hue, her warmth suffocating, her laughter like a promise broken.

He tarried with her too long. Dawn sharpened its blade against the hills, and the cock crowed.

He woke to fetters. His wrists were bound by chains so fine they glittered, his body slick with a nameless damp. The room smelled of roses and rust. From shadowed corners, footsteps sounded—the old woman entering with a chalice of dark wine. Her robe, black as ash at midnight, clung to her like living flame.

"Sweet prince," said she, "thou didst stay beyond the hour. Know now the covenant of my house. Daylight doth demand sacrifice."

"Release me," he gasped, "and all I possess is thine."

"All?" The word hung upon her lips like a kiss withheld. "Nay, my dear child, you have already given all—your promise, your seed, your vanity. My daughters shall build their world from thy remains."

Then the daughters came—barefoot, their hair unbound, their voices an unholy harmony. The bronze one bore a knife that shone like a heart newly cut. The silver one held a basin wrought with runes that shimmered faintly. The golden daughter bent near his face, traced a finger down his neck, and whispered, "We thank you for your warmth."

The mother lifted her chalice high. "Let the proud bleed for the peaceful," she intoned, "and the feast of centuries begin."

When they were finished, silence fell deep as the grave. Outside, the air thickened with the scent of roses blooming redder than reason. From that night hence, no man dared approach the valley; travellers who wandered near claimed to hear soft laughter riding the wind and to see, among the garden's vines, a figure pale and half-formed—a prince kept for eternity in fertile soil.

And the Mother sat at her hearth and smiled. "It is well," she murmured, "that the world shall at last be ruled by those who know how to bleed and yet live."

1411: The Tale of the Ill-Favoured Cygnet

What became of the so-called ugly duckling was for many years wrapped in the veil of courtly discretion, though rumour, that winged herald of half-truths, would not be silenced. Some whispered that from a single night of unseasonable tenderness between a lady of high distinction and a gentleman of such doubtful origin as to make the saints blush, there issued a child of uncertain plumage. Others, more daring in their malice, declared the creature no true duckling at all, but rather a cygnet hatched unbidden in the royal pond—a bird whose very grace condemned its supposed mother.

In that age of powdered virtue and hereditary scruples, the appearance of any fledgling unlike its kind set all the courtiers calculating. The dowagers fanned themselves into faintness; the bishops turned their eyes discreetly skyward, as though Heaven might correct the matter; and the ministers whispered consultations behind velvet screens. Was this birth an omen? A jest of Nature? Or the bold ambition of a woman whose charms had overleapt her rank? None could answer without risking either her favour or her wrath.

Yet among the lesser halls and servants' quarters the story grew wings of its own. The duckling, they said, had feathers too white for common stock, a neck too proud, an air too assured—traits unbecoming in one of unacknowledged descent. When the royal genealogists traced the bloodlines and found no rightful branch to perch upon, they did what all good chroniclers of noble confusion do: they wrote nothing at all and waited for time to bury the matter in ceremony and lace.

Still, whispers are a long-lived breed. Years later, when a certain foreign Kaiser put forth claims of kinship to the English crown, the tale was revived in salons and embassies alike. Some recalled the ill-favoured hatchling of Hungarian origin, raised among reeds and rumours, whose grown magnificence none dared deny. "There," murmured the old ladies, "lies the stain in the tapestry—the swan that flew where he had no right to fly". And though treaties were negotiated and titles appended, the story lingered, faint as perfume after a ball, suggesting that beauty itself may sometimes be the most damning proof of illegitimacy.

1432: the Horned Mouse

In times now past, when thunder prowled the skies and the sun laughed brightly upon the fields, there lived a wondrous creature known to the woodsfolk as the Horned Mouse. Quick as thought and

soft as moss against the fingers, the Horned Mouse danced in the shadows when the thunder roared, its tiny feet tapping a merry tune upon the earth.

This elusive being made its home in a burrow—a place of safety nestled just beneath the thick roots of the bramble blackberry bushes, where the sweet berries ripened in the summer sun. There, beneath tangled thorns and green leaves, it sheltered from the world and dreamed of the wonders waiting in the woods.

When the clouds gathered and the sky growled, the Horned Mouse would leap from its hidden burrow and twirl beneath the storm's mighty voice, as if the very thunder were its dance partner. But when the sun laughed from above, spilling golden light upon the land, the Horned Mouse would quiet itself and slip quietly back into hiding, content to wait for the night to return.

Ever curious, the Mouse sought out the marvels of the forest—bright mushrooms that glowed in the dark, flowers that only bloomed at dusk, and gentle creatures with eyes full of ancient secrets. It knew the rustling of leaves and the whisper of the wind, greeting each as a friend.

And so, the Horned Mouse danced and explored, hidden and joyful, in a world of wonders that stretched far beyond the reach of any tale or song.



In the age before practicality had been invented and long before religion acquired punctuation, there lay a land called Virelda, which stood half in mist and half in administrative error. It was a country rich in superstition, more moons than calendrical sense, and regulations so old that even dragons had trouble complying. On clear days—two a year, on average—you could see across the entire breadth of Virelda from the Bay of Reasonable Storms to the Mountains of Mildly Foreboding Aspect, where the snow was said to whisper secrets to itself out of boredom.

It was, by every available measure, a magical land. The trees had opinions. Graves discussed theology. Even the shadows sometimes swapped partners for a dance. But the greatest and most paradoxical of all Virelda's problems was witches.

Now, officially, there were no witches. None whatsoever. The Church of Likely Doctrine had published exhaustive pamphlets proving their nonexistence, backed by graphs, charts, and a man named Father Bromwell who once personally hadn't seen a witch at least

twice. Still, there persisted the occasional individual—usually a farmer, sometimes a midwife, occasionally a pelican—who maintained that they had seen one, possibly two witches in their lifetime, though curiously never while sober.

The authorities, having little to do between famines, launched periodic Witch Audits, which culminated—after long committee meetings and a great deal of shouting—in the lighting of a bonfire and the ceremonial recitation of the *Malleus Maleficarum*, an ancient handbook on how to burn imaginary friends. The book, bound in theology and confidence, encouraged witch burning as an excellent way to “purify the soul of the afflicted woman (rarely man) and eradicate the traces of Satan.”

Which would have been perfectly adequate advice had Satan not enjoyed fire as one enjoys a good massage.

In most cases, of course, no witch was ever inconvenienced by these ceremonies. The participants had already agreed on innocence and guilt before consulting anything as tiresome as evidence. They simply built a pyre, invited the town’s better families, and let the flames do what flames did best—shed light on human folly.

But folklore—that untidy cousin of truth—whispered that occasionally, just occasionally, the witch hunters got unlucky and found what they thought they wanted. And that, as it turned out, was much worse.

For in Virelda there existed a rare sort of witch—the genuine article. Not your broomstick-polishing, toad-collecting domestic sorceress, but the old kind. The kind the hills still remembered. Women whose eyes glowed like drowned moons, whose laughter unsettled the timbers of churches, who spoke the tongue of salamanders, and who could tell the wind which way to blow, though it seldom obeyed unless it fancied the trip.

When such a witch was caught—if “caught” can ever describe a being that allows itself to be found—the hunters would do what they always did. They tied her to a stake built of good, honest oak and fear, surrounded her with protocol, and set the fire ablaze.

At first, all went traditionally. The flames licked upward, orange and arrogant. The crowd gasped, as crowds love to do. The witch herself merely smiled as if reminded of a private joke. Then, as the fire climbed higher, something happened that was not in the liturgy, not even in the appendix of the *Malleus*, which is saying something.

The flames blued. Not a timid blue, but a deep, impossible sapphire—so pure it made the daylight look embarrassed. The air trembled; every candle within a mile sputtered in deference. And the witch—if

one had eyes keen enough to see amidst that wild colour—burst into laughter so bright it left scars on the sky.

Then, quite without bothering to die, she vanished.

The crowd did what crowds always do when magic ruins their fun: they declared it wasn't real. The captain of witch hunters ordered the ashes collected for further study, then quietly buried his own notes in the garden. And Father Bromwell added a marginal annotation to his copy of the *Malleus*: "Concerning blue flames—this must never, under any theological circumstances, happen again."

Yet, in the villages of Virelda, small and prone to gossip, people noticed certain coincidences. Gardens thrived unreasonably overnight. Wells that had long run brackish began to sing in clear tones. Old women previously accused of witchcraft found their rheumatism gone and their cats possessed of suspicious literacy.

By the autumn rains, the blue light was being spoken of with awe, terror, and the smug certainty that one's cousin's neighbour's aunt had seen it firsthand. Whenever ordinary fire flickered strangely, the townsfolk whispered, "A witch walked here once."

And among the forest clearings where lanterns dare not go, travellers would sometimes glimpse a small, wandering flame, the colour of moonlight through deep water. It would hover just long enough to be mistaken for hope or hallucination—and then be gone, leaving behind a faint, cheerful scent of brimstone and amusement.

The monks at the great Library of Aldegast refused to record these stories, fearing accusations of unprofessional wonder. Yet a few daring scholars muttered that real witches were never harmed by fire—not because fire spared them, but because it remembered who made it first.

So, when the wind howls oddly and the night turns blue along the edges, the good people of Virelda prefer to stay indoors, bolt the windows, and speak politely about roast lamb instead of theology. For everyone who lives in that peculiar country knows—even if they won't admit it over supper—that occasionally, the witch hunters find the real thing.

And those, as the saying goes, are the witches to seriously, absolutely, and for the love of all charred saints, watch out for.

1452: A fairy tale

In a kingdom not unlike our own, where marble halls echoed with velvet laughter and the air was tinged with the perfume of wistful hope, there reigned a monarch singularly besotted with a fine and curious idea. It was decreed, with all the flourish befitting a sovereign who fancied himself a patron of the improbable, that a treasure of

unmatched virtue—the Oracle—must be found to quench the thirst of the realm’s future. The prize for its finding? The hand of the Prince, a prize precious beyond gold and freedom itself.

Thus, three companions, each a brother-in-heart, bound not by blood but by a devotion that sang in equal measure to courage, wit, and quiet admiration, set forth. Their task: to traverse wilds where shadows larked, and storms played games with fallen leaves, all for the glory of love and legend.

After trials as curious as the scheming of a dandy and arduous as the ploughman’s back, they came upon the fabled site—a lotus of such exquisite bloom it might have been plucked from the very dreams of the gods, its nine petals unfurling like a lover’s secret smile under a silvery smile of moonlight. Perched at its core was the Oracle: a duck. But not any duck, no common quacker; this creature was a marvel—a tapestry woven from the iridescence of peacock dreams and crystal prisms, its feathers spilling mosaic rainbows fragmenting the light.

One friend was utterly mesmerised—his gaze fixed, his soul held captive in the gleam of the fantastical plumage. Another, overwhelmed by the magic, succumbed swiftly to slumber, nestled among petals, dreaming perhaps of the Prince’s smile. The third, steadier of gaze and soul, simply admired—a silent witness to beauty that required no words.

Having fulfilled the King’s demand with nary a quibble regarding the peculiar nature of the treasure, the three returned, their bonds stronger and their hearts light. True to the promise, they each wed the Prince, a *quarto* in joyous union, their days hence marked by laughter, love, and endless tales of their curious quest.

It is said in those gleaming halls and whispered in velveteen corners, that the true treasure of kingdoms is not gold nor jewels, but the courage to seek the uncommon, and the grace to accept the wondrous in all its splendid forms.

1460: Off with his head

There once lived a king who was exceedingly good at his job. He spent every day of every week fighting and smiting and beheading all his enemies, expanding his territories and being terribly unpleasant to anyone who stood in the way of his ambitions. Afraid of no one and of nothing, not even of Glod.

Now Glod, mild of aspect yet iron in patience, whispered in the King’s ear: *“Take thou one day in seven for rest, lest thou find thyself alone upon the earth with none left to conquer.”*

One day, wearied after his latest successful battle, he decided to follow that advice. He declared that henceforth, one day each week would be given over to a different form of pleasurable occupation.

He declared that on Saturdays bawdy stage-plays, maintaining lords of misrule, May games, church-ales, festive gatherings, feasts and wakes; piping, dancing, playing dice, cards, bowls, tennis and football and such other pastimes; drunkenness and whoredom; bear-baiting, cock-fighting, hawking and hunting; holding fairs and markets; reading lascivious and wanton books; and an infinite number of such like practises and exercises were to be conducted with rigour and zest. Or else.

Glod wasn't convinced that this was the right way to go about the matter. He had really only meant a day of rest from the King's exertions.

So Glod sent one of his misbegotten sons, Eustace, Rebbot of St-Nonce-de-Fey with a copy of a letter that had fallen from heaven on to the rooftop of a Fey church—an event which had caused the people of that area to lie on the ground for three days and nights, together with their spiritual advisers, imploring the mercy of Glod. Who admittedly was mildly displeased at such a waste of time.

This heaven-sent document, which the Rebbot took from town to town on a preaching tour against Saturday pleasures, warned that violations of the fourth commandment would be punished by a rain of stones, wood and scalding water at night; in addition, the fruit trees would wither, the fountains would dry up, the pagan nations would come and slay them all, and, as if all this were not enough, fearful animals would devour women's breasts and men's nutmegs and cabbages. Moved by these threats and by the Rebbot's exertions, the people vowed not to let anything be sold on the Glod's special day, except meat and drink to travellers; not to work on that day; and to give money to the Rebbot.

To ensure the people and their King took proper notice, at Biranly a carpenter and a weaver who went on working after three o'clock one Saturday were struck with the palsy. At a village in Linshire dough put in a hot oven after that hour stayed unbaked till the Monday; elsewhere a man who had baked a cake on a Saturday evening found that it bled when he bit into it next day; while a miller trying to work his mill on a Saturday discovered, no doubt to his horror, that blood gushing from between the stones was preventing them from turning. Glod and his son decided that might be enough.

"Behold," cried the Rebbot, "thus are Glod's warnings made manifest."

One Monday morning, the King had the Rebbot beheaded, collected all the money into his treasury and returned to slewing.

1467: Duck eggs

In the year when the clock forgot its rhythm and the village cockerels called to no dawn, there was a valley surrounded by mirrors of water rather than hills. The people said the waters were patient, for they reflected all things without possessing them. And upon one still pond, on a perfectly circular island of reeds, sat a duck—the only duck in all that land.

No one knew whence she came. Some said she had flown from the moon before there were eggs; others whispered that the wind had breathed her into being so it might have something gentle to disturb. Her feathers were the colour of thought before it finds words. Beneath her rested an egg so pale that it held the memory of clouds.

The duck's eyes saw two worlds at once—the one that was and the one that would be. She sat always, motionless but for the small turning of her gaze, as though she were both guarding and waiting. Was it the egg she was guarding, or her own still heart that lay hidden within that shell? No villager could tell.

They brought her grain, but she would not eat; they sang, but she did not stir. The wise schoolmaster declared that she was the Mother of Ducks, waiting for her children to dream her into being. Yet one curious child, watching her reflection on the water, whispered that perhaps she was not above the egg at all but within it—waiting to hatch into the world she already inhabited.

Seasons moved without moving. The pond froze and thawed, the people aged, new houses rose and fell back into earth. Still she sat, or rather, still she dreamed. And one night, just before the moon folded itself into shadow, a faint crack traced itself along the egg's shell. But no sound followed—no break, no birth. Only the quiet expansion of an idea too large to remain enclosed.

At dawn, the villagers found the island empty. The egg was smooth again, without fracture or stain, and within its curved surface they could see the image of a seated duck. Each insisted she looked precisely as before. The schoolmaster nodded solemnly. "Of course", he said, "for she has hatched into herself".

And thus the cycle recommenced: the duck watches over the egg that holds her image, and within that image she sits once more, wondering whether she dreams or is dreamed. The water of the valley reflects her perfectly, and time folds itself—soft as down—so that the beginning remains forever waiting inside the end.

There was once an angle called Glod-frey. Any dolt will tell you—if you can drag him away from fluffing his navel—that Glod-frey was brother to Glod, eldest son of an impossibly large family.

Glod himself sat on the biggest seat in *heeven*, glowering, while his wife fled after bearing him seven sons. His other siblings—dullards all—were content to be worshipped by dolts who mistook their own lint for divine providence.

One spring morning, weary of being his brother's hand-warmer, Glod-frey twitched his wings and declared, "*Enough*". He went to the celestial bazaar and ordered a basalt coach with cobalt wings, a crystal sceptre, a ball of string and a star-shaped thingummy. They were out of cobalt, so he had to settle for black.

"I'm going down there," he told Glod, "to liven things up a bit. Mischief, good cheer, maybe a new dance step. Try and stop me. And for the record—black washes me out."

Down he went, and settled in a pleasant valley he renamed **Hardes**. He loosed his hounds, Ereboots and Cereblouse, dug a moat, and hired a ferryman who charged visiting dolts little discs of base metal. For centuries he thrived.

Glod-frey was a master of disguises: sometimes a cloven hoof on a mantel, sometimes half an eye in a jar of vinegar, sometimes his favourite horse-hooved, horn-tufted form with a splash of red hair. He liked the bubbie folk best—jolly, earthy, too often dismissed upstairs—who danced, cracked jokes, and made lerv. For their amusement he invented boogie-woogie, which spread like wildfire, except in *heeven*, where it was banned as "too syncopated."

But Glod grew jealous. He missed his hand-warmer and loathed his brother's popularity. So he set his PR department to work. They invented "sin," rewrote the *Babble*, and filled it with snakes, girlies doing "wrong" things (like learning), and dreary dolts turning wine into water. Suddenly, Glod-frey was branded the Devil.

Thus was born that famous phrase, still intoned by dolts of the right sort: "*Whoever practises sinning is of the devil, for the devil has sinned from the beginning*". Which was unfair, since Glod-frey hadn't even arrived at the beginning.

And that is why the clever say even now: heaven is full of pious bores, but hell is where the music plays, the drink flows, and the good company gathers.



Once, in that blurred age the storytellers call the First Remembering, before men named their settlements and before “throne” was more than an instinct in mud and muscle, the world was mostly water pretending to be land. The rivers had no loyalty; they wandered like gods in drunken pilgrimage. The sky hoarded rain for years, then spent it all in a single reckless season. And because nothing that swam could sleep long on ground that drowned every spring, men learned to dream of hills.

In that grey-green country, which no map will claim now, there stood the city of Anhar, though it was not yet a city, truthfully, but a question built of reeds. The people of Anhar made their homes low for need, and high for fear. When the floods came—and they always came uninvited—the water rose in silence like breath drawn in anger. Yet, when it left, it always left behind something unexpected: new soil, lost treasures, occasional prophets, and the memory of having survived.

After one such great inundation, remembered in carvings years older than itself, the people carried up from their drowned plain handfuls of clay and laid it down again, higher. Each year the mound grew—a layered memory of disaster and defiance, a city that climbed the sky grain by grain. They built their temples not to look grand, but to stay visible. The first priesthood were architects of fear, their holiness measured in feet above the floodline.

The ancients say there was one man among them, Enmar the Builder, who, seeing the waters lick at the doors of his house, gathered people atop the mound and commanded them to bring stones from the ruined walls below. All through the night they dragged them up, weeping in exhaustion, until morning came gold across the plain and Anhar rose one cubit higher. Upon that height, Enmar built a low stone seat to rest from the work. When the water came next season, it reached for him and failed. That was the first throne.

They said afterward that Enmar had power, for he sat above the danger, and from that moment men who could reach a higher place were believed to command what they had merely escaped. The children of Anhar began to cheer when their leaders climbed those steps, not because of the view, but from the memory of drowning. And so the throne was born, a dry patch mistaken for divinity.

Time dripped forward like a river seeking somewhere lower to go. Cities multiplied—Eridu beside her forests, Uruk with her towers, Ur shimmering in dust. Each raised platform grew steeper, each staircase more ornamental. What once was the mound of survival became the

mountain of holiness. Priests spoke of gods living aloft, of a heaven measured by altitude. The stone seat on which a weary man had rested turned into a dais, then into a legend. They carved their ziggurats after the bones of storms, stacking sun-baked clay until their summits smoked in cloudlight.

No one, afterward, built merely to be dry. They built to be nearer to what they could not touch. Flood became metaphor, and the mound became myth. And as the centuries folded over themselves, rulers who had never known wet feet still demanded their thrones lifted higher, until they sat where rivers could never trouble them—though men still did.

The wise have written that in those oldest days, safety rose first, then sanctity climbed after it. But the storytellers of Anhar tell it better. They say that when the waters withdrew, Enmar's seat stayed shining in the sun, a single stone dry amid all the gleaming mud. The people gathered around it, awed at such defiance. One by one they touched it, as though some part of the flood still lingered within. Then, slowly and without instruction, they began to kneel.

And that was how power found its posture.

Even now, in deeper dreams and salt-stained memory, the rivers still whisper to the heights: you owe us this stillness. And men, from their carved thrones and golden terraces, look down as if to answer, though none of them remember why their chairs are so very high.

For what the scholars forgot, and the poets never stopped knowing, is that the first throne was not shaped from marble or ambition. It was made of mud dried by mercy—the last dry stone in the flood, upon which someone sat, and others, half-drowned, looked up.

1480: How Edward keeps his august name

In the far reaches of the Nine-and-a-Half Realms, somewhere between where reality overslept and where imagination ran out of tea, there stands the Hall of Naming. Not that anyone quite knows who built it—some say the Norns did, with runes carved into the gaps between meaning and misunderstanding; others insist it was put there by cosmic administration to prevent the universe from being overrun with nameless things that sulk in corners.

The Hall is vast. Infinitely so, which makes it inconvenient to clean. Its roof curves so high that clouds form under it, and from these drift small rains of raw sound— syllables-that-haven't-decided-what-to-be. They splatter on the marble and evaporate into possibility. The air smells of ink, thunder, and the faint emotion one feels before remembering something important.

Down the endless corridor stand the Doors. Each is carved from a different grain of reality: some polished oak, some silver, several made entirely of good intentions. Behind each hums a particular vibration—the almost-formed idea of a thing waiting to become something definite.

Expressions—those vague, shapeless puffs of existence with no form and too many hobbies—float through the Hall like lazy smoke rings. They drift from one door to another, trying them gently, politely, as if hoping to find one that fits their mood. And when at last an Expression touches its proper doorway, the wood ripples and reshapes; the hinges creak like sighs; and with a shimmer of recognition the Expression steps through and emerges named.

One such moment occurred recently in Doorway 34-B, where a small, tentative expression was seized by the concept of feathers. The door obligingly carved itself into the word duck. Moments later there waddled out a pleasantly bewildered mallard who thought the whole process unnecessarily loud. It blinked, admired its own reflection in a pool of newly invented water, and introduced itself as Daisy, though another duck followed immediately after insisting on being Tom, and there was a brief dispute over pronouns.

This happened constantly. “Rock” would become rocks, “rain” would become rain, “regret” would scowl its way into the dictionary and ruin everyone’s afternoon.

But, occasionally—so rarely that the cosmic clerks keep missing it, even though it’s highlighted in gold ink—an Expression takes a wrong turning. Not through any fault of intention, but because destiny is easily distracted and signage in the Hall of Naming is notoriously vague. These stray expressions slip, almost bashfully, through a side door, one with no label at all, and from it emerges something unreasonably specific.

And thus it came to pass that yet again the Hall witnessed the emergence of a Prince among Names. He stepped out in velvet certainty, boots polished by metaphor, his smile gleaming with inherited adjectives. He took a breath that smelled faintly of destiny and announced, with impeccable diction:

“Edward Augustus Fitzartur, at your most humble and repeated service.”

No one in the Hall knew quite what to do with him. He was perfect in every descriptive detail—every vowel balanced, every consonant precisely shined. The expressions nearby looked jealous and pretended to be busy turning into cabbages. Even the doors fluttered shyly in their hinges.

Now, Edward Augustus Fitzartur was not new to himself. In fact, he had appeared countless times before, always via the same side door, emerging immaculate, tidy, and irritatingly prepared to be special. Rumour had it that some ancient clerk, prone to caffeine and absent-mindedness, had accidentally lodged his template between “Eagle” and “Egotism,” resulting in an eternal series of princely redos.

And every time Edward Augustus Fitzartur emerged, the universe experienced a brief sense of *déjà vu*, like an old tune heard from another room. The last time it happened, the stars themselves had applauded politely. The time before that, a village in the Western Fens collectively sneezed and accidentally invented opera.

“What am I this time?” Edward asked the Hall politely, as if ordering from a menu.

The Hall, not being accustomed to small talk, rumbled something between thunder and bureaucracy.

“Still special, I presume?” said Edward hopefully.

If a silence could look weary, this one did.

Satisfied, Edward flicked an invisible speck of uncertainty from his cuff, gave the nearest door a companionable nod, and set off toward the world beyond—where gossip says he acquires kingdoms the way other people acquire allergies. Outside, magic curled around him the way an appreciative cat curls around its favourite disaster. Fields arose to flatter him, oceans adjusted their tides respectfully, and clouds paused to think how best to frame him against the horizon.

For though the world had no shortage of princes, only Edward Augustus Fitzartur arrived complete with italics. It is said he once held an entire conversation with a thunder god about the proper etiquette of smiting, persuaded a wyrm to become an accountant, and accidentally declared war on a flock of geese who mistook his reflection for provocation. Each of his adventures has been told at least seventeen ways, and every telling insists he looked magnificent while misunderstanding most of it.

And yet, in the Hall of Naming, the side door still glows faintly. Somewhere inside its grain hums the faint promise that another Edward Augustus Fitzartur is waiting, patiently unhatched, to step forth again—identical, inconvenient, incandescently sure of himself. The clerks have long stopped trying to fix it; the Architect of Language claims it adds dignity to the chaos.

Thus the Hall continues its labour: doors glimmer, words hatch, ducks emerge, and expressions drift toward identity. Somewhere among them all, the blueprint of a self-satisfied prince sneaks around the edges of creation, waiting for his next cue, his next audience, his next splendidly unnecessary entrance.

And the Hall, vast and weary and full of unclaimed possibilities, sighs: Here he comes again.

The candlelight brightens, ink trembles in its wells, and the universe, already resigned, prepares once more for Edward Augustus Fitzartur to pull destiny's handle, stride into being, and ruin enchantment with panache.

1492: Quiet please

It is said that Glod speaks rarely and only to those who wear crowns. To shepherds, beggars, merchants, maids, he is mute as stone. To priests he nods but does not answer. To philosophers he turns his back. But when kings wear themselves thin with conquest, he sometimes sighs and allows a word.

So it was with that King who smote and slew and then proclaimed a whole day for stage-plays, dice, May-games, whoredom, cock-fighting, hawking, drunkenness and the like. The world roared with laughter and spilt ale.

Glod, frowning in his upper seat, leaned low and whispered:

“Smite less, fool. A kingdom cannot be held if its sons are palsied, its bread bleeds when bitten, its mills run red. You were not made to turn wine into water, nor merriment into blight. Even gods cannot stomach endless revels.”

The King, flushed with his new day of pleasure, raised his goblet and ignored him.

So Glod tried once more, more softly:

“Rest. Not riot. That was my counsel.”

But kings hear only what flatters their ears. And because Glod had spoken at all, the priests set to scribbling, the people to trembling and the word became law: Glod was against laughter, Glod was for solemn faces and closed shops, Glod was stone and silence.

In truth, Glod had only asked for quiet.

1501: The Frenchman's complaint

Once there lived a Bulgar called Bulger who, being chaste was so often chased, he was arrested. Yet as he attested he was not to blame for such shame.

“For do you see, My Lords,” he exclaimed to those noble paragons of that virtuous See, “I have, I do pray, simply followed the way of a Xtian.”

He added, most humbly disclaimed: “For has not the puritan, St No-Not of Adolphous d'Aeraemaethaeiea proclaimed: ‘avoid all sin you

sinner that you may not face the wrath of Peta, who stands at the gates of Paranoia, forbidding all but the most faithful?'"

"Aye," replied a Lord, lifting his head from the lap of his mistress." Aye, then off with yer head ye lollop. For we'll have no bugling Bulgar tell us our creed, in deed or in plaintive tones."

"Aye," murmured his mistress, "and salt all his lands, bring me my stole he stole and my freemen too, to your Lord's greater glory and my own joy."

And so it came to pass. And verily to all future generations a Bulger was never no more than a Frenchman's complaint, brought to our fair shores by a chaste man who declined to be chased.

1502: The Prophecy of the Duke

It is seldom recalled that nobility, while often incapable of thought, proves remarkably capable of consequence. Thus it was with the Duke of Mallard, who inherited both an illustrious name and an inconvenient mind. The family, long resident in the northern shires and believed to have been ennobled by a king who mistook them for another house altogether, carried with it the oddest heraldry in Christendom: a mallard duck grasping a laurel leaf in its bill, above the motto, Providence Will Out.

That phrase was repeated often in the house, sometimes as prayer, sometimes as warning, and always when anything untoward occurred—which was frequently.

In the year of Our Lord fifteen hundred, the Duke faced what he termed "a matrimonial irregularity," though others might have called it a curse. His first wife, a small woman with large opinions about celestial influence, had refused all conjugal conversation. Instead she had set about consulting certain "witchery mid-wives," village women whose herbs and charm-bags were said to keep the body wholesome, the womb contrary, and the husband docile but disappointed. The Duke bore this trial in silence for seven years, until silence grew unbearable. It was then that he announced, before a dinner of religious men and moral cowards, that Providence would soon find the proper correction for obstinate virtue.

Providence obliged with exemplary punctuality. On the morning after her thirtieth birthday, the Duchess was discovered in her chamber—burned to something smaller than herself. Her gown, they said, had caught a spark from the hearth. The servants whispered that when they rushed in, the fire seemed to curl away from the curtains and leap towards her, as though attending to some forgotten debt. The smell

endured so long in the chimney that the entire wing had to be repointed and blessed.

The Duke grieved decorously, then declared to all who would hear that the true cause of misfortune lay in the woman's initials, which did not—he noted with genealogical precision—follow the alphabetic pattern of his house's leaf insignia. "It is evident," he proclaimed, "that she was unaligned with the Mallard principle, and thus justly pruned by Divine order". Even the bishop could find no fault with reasoning so immaculately self-serving.

Within the year he remarried, an agreeable young widow of Devon, and produced both heir and spare in gratifying haste. Having thus satisfied Society, Providence, and himself, the Duke retired to "contemplate the treasures of his wing," a phrase historians have delicately corrected to mean "grow peculiar in his upper rooms."

For the household soon noticed the new Duchess had taken to locking her door by day and singing peculiar lullabies by night—verses without rhyme or mercy that mentioned ducks, ashes, and the turning of the moon. She also collected feathers from the marsh at dawn and refused to eat fowl; when told that this was unpatriotic given the family arms, she replied pleasantly that some heraldic meals were best left untasted.

As for the Duke, he became devoted to his study of ancestry. One cold evening, poring over a charter dated two centuries before, he found a marginal note in a crabbed feminine hand:

The leaf burns. The line rots. Providence is a duck with teeth.

He assumed a jest, though unsettling, and drew his candle closer. A draft exhaled from the hearth; the flame grew long, yellow, and strangely alive. In its light, the seal at the bottom of the parchment glistened bright green, as though fresh wax had been poured upon it. The impression, which had formerly shown a mallard with laurels, now bore an outline unlike any natural bird—a thing half-feathered, half-flame, beaked and crowned and very faintly smiling.

When morning came, the Duke was found in his chair, quite dead, with his signet fused to his finger and a patch of soot upon his breast shaped like a leaf.

The widowed Duchess—who bore a passing resemblance to what the peasants called a "wise woman" and the priests condemned more selectively—put the affairs of the estate in order. She dismissed the foreign chaplain, sold the peacocks, and issued a curious notice to the tenants that henceforth the family feast of Saint John would be called the Night of the Returning Feather. She was frequently seen walking by the pond at dusk, speaking very softly to the water. One soldier swore

he saw a single white duck rise from the reed bed and hover above her head like a benediction before vanishing.

When asked whether she feared her husband's ghost might return, the Duchess replied mildly, "Ghosts are what remain of people who never listened while alive. I should be safe enough."

And so the legend of the House of Mallard settled into local superstition. It is still said that every generation the leaf upon their crest blisters black and the eldest son dreams of fire. Monks at the nearby priory keep a record of these occurrences, along with a prophecy attributed to one Dame Agnes of Nuttery, an elderly prophetess who had once traded duck feathers for ink.

Her prophecy reads:

When man's conceit doth make him leaf,
And wife is burned for his relief,
Then shall the water claim its kin,
And Providence be proved by sin.

Scholars of darker inclination note that the original parchment of the prophecy bears a watermark in the shape of a mallard rising through flame. The safe at the Hall where it was long preserved was found empty in later centuries, and the motto was quietly shortened by descendants to Providence Out.

And if on certain foggy nights one hears laughter like the rustle of feathers and the crackle of kindling, it is best not to investigate. For the Mallard line, though ancestral and noble, has always believed that Providence provides—for those who can bear its sense of humour.



Once upon a gilded dusk in an age that smelled faintly of rose oil, fresh ink, and ambition, there lived the Dukes of Mallard—a dynasty so opulent that their wealth was less a possession than a natural resource. They inhabited mansions not so much built as exhaled by the earth in deference, and they owned so vast a portion of the world that maps politely shaded several regions "under Mallard consideration."

The Mallards were not wicked, nor charitable, nor even especially industrious. They existed in that state of divine pointlessness reserved for stars and aristocrats. Their crests—three mallards walking abreast beneath a crown that had forgotten modesty—adorned everything from carriages and cathedrals to spoons, sailing fleets, and the underside of

cigars. Their motto, *Per Mare, Per Avaritiam*, meant *By Sea, By Greed*, which was at least honest for a family history that began when the first Duke married a shipping heiress and accidentally colonised half the tropics while searching for better tea.

The dukedom stretched from what polite maps called “the inner colonies” (known locally as “everywhere else”) to the mountains of Mallard Minor, whose veins of copper had once turned the Duke’s fingers green when counting profits, until he decided green was becoming fashionable. They owned entire nations’ debts, half the clouds above them through complex meteorological investments, and a few cities underground whose sole purpose was to collect their refuse and sell it back as “heritage artefacts.”

In their winter palace—a confection of marble, mirrors, and mild disbelief—the family held court over a thousand servants, all elegantly trained to vanish the instant they were needed. The chandeliers drooped with crystals large enough to be used for prophecy in lesser households; the tapestries depicted events that hadn’t quite happened yet. At dinner, courses succeeded one another like dynasties: Peacock à la Perseverance, Soup of Forgotten Kingdoms, and the delicate dessert known as *Regret en Gelée*.

Every Mallard had a fortune, and most had several spare. They collected wealth much as poets collected sighs—instinctively and with occasional embarrassment. It was said that the current Duke could lose a small province in a card game and notice only because someone replaced his chair with a slightly cheaper one.

Their empire ran on invisible abundance. Merchants trembled when they bowed, as though proximity alone might attract taxation. Courtiers lied to please them, philosophers justified them, and artists adored them—or pretended to—for fear of being painted out of history.

Now into this paradise of acquisitive calm came one Jeremiah Hobb, the poorest man in the county, which was no small achievement. Jeremiah lived in a hut that leaned slightly away from the wind, as if embarrassed. He possessed four pennies, two opinions, and one hat to share between them. His back was permanently bowed from picking things up that weren’t his—not out of meanness, but curiosity.

Jeremiah had heard the old Latin proverb uttered in smug circles: *Cantabit vacuus coram latrone viator*—“The empty traveller sings before the robber”. Which meant, in essence, that the poor man walks safest, having nothing to steal. Jeremiah thought this an extravagant nonsense but decided, as an experiment, to discover its truth.

So he rose at dawn, buttoned poverty around himself like a respectable jacket, and set out singing loudly through the countryside, for singing was said to keep robbers away. It did not.

For scarcely had he reached the first crossroads when a rogue leapt from the hedge. This robber, being pragmatic, halted at once upon seeing Jeremiah's condition.

"You carry nothing of value," growled the highwayman.

"On the contrary," said Jeremiah brightly. "I carry this tune."

The robber frowned. "Tunes fetch little at market these days."

"But they unburden the soul," Jeremiah replied, which so bewildered the thief that he let him pass unharmed—if only to stop the philosophy.

Jeremiah reached the gates of the Mallard estate by twilight, convinced now that poverty was not protection but merely unprofitable theft. At the gilded gate, he saw guards dozing beside carriages carved to resemble swans on credit. Past them stretched lawns so endless and well-combed that the grass looked ashamed of being natural.

And in the hall beyond stood the Duke of Mallard, magnificent as a thundercloud that had inherited a castle. He was listening, with polite boredom, to accountants explaining how much he owned—a task no one had completed in living memory. They were currently up to "six continents and several improvements to the weather."

Jeremiah, who had not seen such wealth since dreaming, crept closer. Something about the jewels and unspent abundance made him itch morally. It was not envy—he was too tired for that—but curiosity again: would the Duke notice a theft so slight it could only be symbolic?

He slipped around a pillar, chose the smallest, least magnificent object available—a silver button fallen from a servant's cuff—and pocketed it. To his astonishment, the hall did not fill with guards or divine thunder. No one noticed. So he picked up another button, then, emboldened, an entire spoon. Nothing happened.

Finally, he approached the Duke himself, who was at that moment absorbed in selecting which of his fourteen crowns best matched his soup course. Jeremiah coughed softly—etiquette, after all, was free—and said, "My lord, do you not mind if I take something?"

"Take what?" asked the Duke, glancing vaguely about.

"Oh, say ... everything."

"By all means," said the Duke. "The inventory's frightfully long. You'll never finish before supper."

And indeed, Jeremiah never did. For as soon as he touched the mountain of gold beside the throne, he realised that wealth this vast behaved like the weather: it changed imperceptibly and obeyed no

human measure. Steal a little, it replenished itself unseen; steal more, and it adjusted accounts elsewhere, balancing its own grandeur.

The guards remained drowsy, the chandeliers hummed approvingly, and Jeremiah found himself holding more coin than his mind could reasonably endure. He dropped it all with a gasp. The Duke smiled indulgently.

“My dear fellow,” he said, “you cannot make the rich poorer by theft, only tired by counting. Take a duck from the fountain next time; they’re self-replenishing.”

Jeremiah, baffled, stumbled out into the cool night with not a penny more than before, yet trailing the faint scent of cinnamon and superiority the mansion exhaled. At the edge of the estate, paupers crowded the hedges to glimpse splendour through the iron tracery.

He tried to tell them what he had learned—that the wealthy were so wealthy they could not be robbed, that abundance multiplied like polite applause—but the words came out as laughter instead. It echoed until dawn, when the birds woke uncertain whether to sing or invest.

And the Dukes of Mallard continued their stately existence, blissfully unaware that they had been stolen from, or that a thief had sung in their hall. For in a world where everything belongs to you, no theft is truly a loss; it’s merely the rearrangement of ownership beneath the same expansive umbrella of wealth.

So the proverb endured, misunderstood by the poor and unneeded by the rich, while the Dukes of Mallard sailed on through history like chandeliers adrift on invisible seas—terribly luminous, utterly useless, and incapable of noticing anything smaller than a coronet.

1517: The Kingdom of the Turning Pyramid

There is, beyond the mists that collect upon the edge of the known, an inverted land: a realm suspended on a single point like a spinning top that never falls. Its name is not easily translated, though travellers from the west call it Virelia, which in their tongue means roughly “the place that hums beneath its weight.” Those who have strayed into its radius—for no one may simply approach it—speak of air that tastes faintly of iron and lilac, of voices rising upward as steam does, and of a sky that darkens from pale gold at the horizon to an improbable violet above, as though the colours reversed themselves in sympathy with the ground below.

The shape of the kingdom is peculiar. It is a pyramid standing upon its point, with the rest of its body widening as it climbs. At the lowest vertex, sunk into a hollow of marble and dimly lit by phosphorescent mosses, sits the King. None call him Majesty, for he has no subjects in

the old sense, nor even much to rule. The value of his reign lies not in command but in bearing. The enormous weight of the realm rests literally upon his small, deliberate person. He is, in appearance, slight to the point of transparency, so attenuated by the gravity of his office that one might mistake him for glass through which the light of his own soul passes unimpeded. His throne is a simple triangle of hammered tin, cold as a forgotten coin, yet through this precarious seat the entire structure of Virelia depends.

Above him—if “above” may be used where all notions of direction are half metaphors—roam the middling folk. They live in compartments along the narrowing planes, each dwelling like a swallow’s nest clinging to a steep cliff. Theirs is a life of cautious equilibrium. They possess a little of everything—music, conversation, bread, water, earnestness—and contrive to share it with a diligent sense of decorum. They are the ones who polish the mirrors that hang face-downward toward the royal vertex, reflecting the dim light back upon him so that he may see the shimmer of his own endurance. They also maintain the thousand small pipes and channels through which the kingdom’s air circulates: a gentle sigh of interdependence, neither quite wind nor quite whisper.

Still higher, widest of all, stretched like a landscape at the point of spilling into unbounded space, dwell the multitudes—the poor in designation but rich in matter. There are too many of them even for the great girth of their domain; they crowd amidst terraces of fruit and stone, tend rivers that run sideways, and gather metals that form naturally in porous spires. Their world is dense with sustenance—so many berries, fishes, grains—that they lose count, and the counting itself becomes their chief employment. They do not govern by decree or by voice but by sheer abundance: the kingdom tilts, minutely yet perpetually, according to their restless movement. They are the broad top upon which all else depends, and yet they believe themselves dispossessed, for plenty, when diffused too widely, becomes indistinct—an ache of having no clear limit to name.

All the exchanges of Virelia move downward. It is not obedience that descends but necessity. From the terraces of plenty seep the waters of survival, filtered through the careful industry of the middle dwellers, to trickle at last into the King’s sealed chamber. With these he drinks, in moderation, and breathes contentedly. In return he murmurs upward—some say in prayer, others call it equation—a sound so faint it can be mistaken for the kingdom’s own vibration. That sound sustains them all.

When one considers the scheme of it, as natural philosophers have tried in uncertain tones, one might suppose the system unstable: a

pyramid poised impossibly upon its least dimension, the monarch holding it with the weight of his slight frame. Yet for all that, it endures—centuries, perhaps. Children are born in the upper gardens, artisans debate philosophy on the glass slopes midway, and the King sits forever at the fulcrum of being, feeling the pressure of all life above him as another man might feel rain. Nothing happens there, precisely, nor can it; the order is complete.

Visitors are not encouraged, for their earthly proportion would disturb the delicate symmetry. But a few have left records in field diaries, mostly confused. One, an English naturalist with an interest in comparative architectures, wrote that standing within Virelia is “like finding oneself flown inside a prism: the base is light, the apex dark, and between them passes all sensation in slow migration.” Another, a painter of some skill, attempted to capture its appearance, but the pigments refused to obey, separating into layers until nothing of the inverted pyramid remained save a faint triangle of dust on the canvas.

And so the land remains unplotted in atlases. Its people live in perpetual inversion, reverent and contented, bearing abundance downwards and receiving silence in return. At dusk they hum softly, for humming carries best through matter. The vibration travels from the terraces down the sloping faces, through the pipes and mirrored wells, until it reaches the King, who closes his nearly translucent eyelids and lets the sound pass through him into the stone below.

He does not answer. He need not. His stillness is the kingdom’s harmony, his faint heartbeat the measure of its time. Were he to stir, the balance might waver; were he to fade, the world would settle upon its side and perhaps, at last, learn what ordinary gravity feels like. But such speculations belong to the outer lands, where pyramids still stand on their proper base and everything weighs as it ought to.

In Virelia the weight is borne upwards. The poor are blest with plenitude, the middling with purpose, and the King with the quiet knowledge that all order, real or imagined, must have its single, shining point of surrender.

1540: Fox and duck

In a far green forest—where the dew clung to the grass like pearls that did not know their value—there lived a Fox of notable cleverness. His eyes were bright as amber and his tail carried the proud sweep of a courtier’s cloak. The forest beasts spoke of his wit with both admiration and fear, for the Fox was famed for solving every riddle and slipping every snare, whether laid by man or nature.

Near the fox's den, by a slow-moving brook where reeds whispered to passing breezes, dwelt a Duck. She was quiet, steadfast, and known for her calm. Others often mistook her silence for emptiness, as those fond of their own voices frequently do. Day after day, she looked upon the world with an even gaze, measuring the changes of sky and shadow without judgement or haste.

The Fox, restless with his own cleverness, found her manner intolerably dull. "Good day, Mistress Duck," he would call from the bank, smirking. "Do you never tire of floating about without purpose? I have chased pheasants, outwitted hounds, stolen food from traps, and once escaped a man with a gun by convincing his own dog to bark the wrong way! And what do you do? You drift and blink."

The Duck only dipped her head and replied mildly, "I see more by drifting than you by running."

This answer made the Fox laugh until his sides ached. "Then the world must be very small indeed, if you can see it all sitting still!" he crowed, and strutted back to his den, delighted with his cleverness.

But words, however lightly spoken, sink somewhere, and pride is a spark that sets even green wood smouldering.

The days turned, and one evening, as twilight spilled like blue ink over the forest, the Fox again mocked the Duck. "Tell me, sober watcher of puddles," he sneered, "when will you learn to speak with wit, or fly with courage? You live as if your feathers were meant for ornament, not flight. You waste gift and time alike."

The Duck looked upon him gravely, her eyes reflecting the last of the sunset. "Pride," she said softly, "is a fine ribbon tied around blindness. Since you wear it so proudly, may you learn how heavy it grows when it is all one has."

Then she spoke strange words—the kind that only the silent ones ever learn—for silence gives shape to power. Her voice, though gentle, cut like frost tracing its pattern across a leaf:

"May your steps falter, Fox of the boasting tongue,
May your bright eyes dim before the moon is young.
May your name be lost where echoes die,
Till you learn what stillness teaches by and by."

The forest shivered, and the Fox blinked. "A curse?" he scoffed, though his mouth tasted of metal. "Ah, nonsense of waterfowl!" And off he trotted, laughing into the gloom.

But within a day, he saw that the paths he had known by heart now twisted strangely. Shadows changed places when he tried to follow

them, and every rustle made his own heart leap in foolish terror. His breath came shallow, and when he called for company, his voice cracked as though the air itself denied him. He forgot which burrow led to his den, and ran in frantic circles until he sank upon the earth, weary and disordered.

As days passed, others left him—first the timid, then the wise. For arrogance has a scent older animals recognise, and they shunned him as one shuns disease. The Fox became a creature of mutterings and memory, living more in regret than in cunning. His cleverness, which once shone like a blade, now dulled with rust.

Meanwhile, the Duck lived serenely by her brook, watching sky and water mirror each other. When storms came, she rode the waves; when calm returned, she glided through the silver surface. She neither sought praise nor hid from sight. And sometimes, through the rustling of the reeds, she heard—very faintly—the Fox’s uneasy steps, and sighed, not in triumph, but pity.

One dawn, when mist hung low and the first light touched her feathers gold, she whispered, “The forest remembers all its lessons, Fox. Even pride must learn humility, though the learning come hard.”

And from that morning, no one saw the Fox again. Some said he wandered into the hills seeking the end of his curse. Others claimed he had become a shadow among shadows, forever chasing his own cleverness through the dark.

But the Duck remained—quiet, observant, untroubled. She taught her ducklings that silence can reveal what shouting hides, and that wisdom is often the echo of restraint. The forest grew no less wild, yet somehow gentler for her presence.

1601: The Ballad of the Berfday Fairy

Once upon a time, in a time before time—or possibly after it but long before anyone cared to check—people were born, lived, and died without ceremony. They arrived as unnoticed as raindrops upon a lake and departed much the same way. Nobody counted; nobody marked; and nobody remembered except perhaps to say, “Oh yes, she was the one who cooked her shoes that winter and lived.”

The universe itself had barely found its balance. Gravity was still provisional, light had yet to settle its differences with darkness, and language was only just beginning to grope wistfully toward nouns. Which, in moral terms, was the perfect environment for people to forget absolutely everything, including each other.

Now, among these temporally challenged folk, there was one woman whose age was as mysterious as her occupation, which seemed to

involve mostly watching everyone else and making notes on their mistakes. Her name, if it existed, has been lost, but ancient records (written centuries later on the back of a menu) describe her as old enough to have seen mountains rise and considered them “a bit ostentatious”. She had lived exactly two hundred years, though since calendars didn’t exist, that figure is both approximate and miraculous.

When she reached one hundred, she began to notice a curious fact: she could not remember ever having been young. The sensation of having once been unwrinkled struck her as appallingly theoretical. To mark this terrible revelation, she decided to hold a small celebration with no precedent whatsoever.

The problem was that without dates there could be no anniversaries, and without anniversaries one couldn’t plan catering. So she determined to calculate her age by asking her mother. This proved inconvenient as her mother had been dead for over a century. However, on the wall of a long-collapsed cottage, she found a piece of vellum upon which her mother—eccentric in the extreme—had written the day and hour of her birth along with a note reading “At last, and not a moment too soon.”

The woman was deeply moved by this peculiar act of documentation and decided that future mothers must all do the same. This was partly spiritual reasoning and partly capitalism, since she happened to own a controlling interest in the local vellum mill. Thus she became both prophet and profiteer in a single inspired epiphany.

To keep track of these new sacred writings, she ordered a vast apparatus of counting days. First she invented the calendar, an object of mysterious rectangles and repeated disappointments. Then she invented months, weeks, and fortnights, all of which had a tendency to slip about until nailed down by the committee she later called Astrologers. For their trouble she paid them in goats, because currency had not yet been refined beyond “object with legs.”

She next invented writing, on the logic that it was frightfully difficult to announce one’s birthdate by interpretive dance alone. With writing came all sorts of unintended consequences such as correspondence, invoices, and relatives who would not stop sending letters.

Still, she pressed on, devising an entire postal service, since she couldn’t possibly hand-deliver every vellum greeting herself—especially to the increasingly ungrateful clients who lived upriver or under other forms of sky. For this she employed an army of spry creatures called Post-hobs, who carried sacks of letters and occasionally fell into existential despair during winter routes.

And when she noticed that cards tended to blow away before reaching their recipients, she invented stamps—small bits of sticky art signifying both legitimacy and mild overpricing—and, when that still

failed, she created gifts. Objects designed to weigh down the cards and conveniently appeal to greed.

By now people had become both confused and fascinated by all these unnecessary innovations. “She sends me paper with my name and numbers on it,” they said, “and expects me to smile”. But because human beings have always secretly adored being singled out, they soon adored her. When a card arrived, they’d shout, “The Fairy’s remembered me!” while pretending not to have waited all morning by the letterbox.

One year, quite without warning, the old woman invited everyone to a festival in her honour. There were ribbons, drumming, and fifteen cakes arranged in an ascending pattern symbolising either age or indigestion. She declared, with all the authority of one who has invented half the infrastructure of civilisation, that she was henceforth to be celebrated as the Berfday Fairy—“because spelling,” she explained archly, “is just a branch of chaos theory.”

From that day forward, humankind learned the important lesson that existence should be periodically interrupted by cake. They began measuring life not in deeds or wisdom, but in how many times the world had rotated since one’s arrival. The Fairy was pleased at first, proud that her idea had brought such merriment—and profit.

But soon she noticed darker consequences. People began forgetting the simple astonishment of being alive on any given morning. They hoarded attention for a single day and sulked for the remaining three hundred and sixty-four. They invented jealousy, competitive gift-giving, and the song “Many Happy Returns” which, even then, went on far too long.

The Fairy withdrew into privacy. Scholars disagree on whether she died or merely stopped attending her own parties. Some say her postal hobs still deliver mysterious cards to wrong addresses: To the universe, on the occasion of its continued existence.

And the tradition endures. Each year, in every corner of the world, humans recreate her strange covenant: they light small fires on cakes, sing slightly off-key hymns, and thank a long-departed entrepreneur who once looked at the chaos of eternity and thought, “Yes, but wouldn’t it be lovely if it arrived with a card?”

PONDERINGS



1618: The Moral History of the Mallards *Being an Account of How Certain Waterfowl Became Virtuous by Sin*

Few families have brought the English peerage more disrepute or entertainment than the House of Mallard, whose ancestral acres were said to have been granted by a king suffering from youthful optimism and poor eyesight. Their crest, a mallard duck holding a spray of laurel, was meant, according to the heralds, to symbolise purity, resilience, and a cheerful interest in shallow waters. In practice it stood for the motto engraved above the east gate of their ancestral seat: *Do As Ducks Do*.

To the Mallards, this had long been less advice than theology. For five centuries they had conducted themselves under the comfortable conviction that morality, like feathers, falls differently upon every creature and cannot reasonably bind those hatched to grandeur. Their philosophy reached its perfection around the year 1600, when the seventeenth Duke—a florid gentleman of uncommon self-regard and excellent waistcoats—announced in a formal sermon to his tenants that the Seven Deadly Sins were, in fact, “merely the seven honest instincts of the human duck.”

“Observe,” said His Grace, “the natural world. The duck is proud of plumage: so we must embrace pride. It feeds excessively when grain is scattered: gluttony, good health. It courts its mate with noisy display and occasional infidelity: lust, the persistence of life. It squabbles over pond-space: wrath, the assertion of property. It envies the goose for its foreign travel: envy, wholesome aspiration. It lounges magnificently: sloth, the contemplation proper to noblemen. And finally, it gathers the whole pond to itself in winter: greed, the fiscal virtue without which no family rises.”

The tenants applauded cautiously. In such times, theological novelty was risky, but rent remission was promised to all who assented. The village priest, finding the Duke persuasive and the tithe profitable, soon adjusted his sermons to suit. “The Almighty,” declared Father O’Gudgeon that Sunday, “made man lord of the fowl, that he might

imitate their better appetites”. Parish religion, having thus joined hands with pond science, prospered handsomely for the space of a generation.

The Duchess of the day—a woman of formidable wit and two surviving chins—developed charitable organisations to encourage transgression in a refined way. Her “Order of the Feathered Grace” met twice weekly to exchange recipes, grievances, and discreet confessions. They were patronesses of the Poor Glutton Society, which distributed cakes to those who could prove indigestion, and sponsors of the Laziness Hospital, which supplied footmen to anyone temporarily indisposed to work. One could not move in Mallard without encountering the evidence of virtue reinterpreted.

The local church itself succumbed to enthusiasm. The abbot, a man of overflowing sympathy for both himself and the wine cellar, composed an entire treatise titled *On the Winged Nature of Forgiveness*, establishing to his satisfaction that what appeared greed in a duck was, philosophically speaking, providence in motion. Copies were displayed prominently in every confessional, though few survived long on account of dripping candles and small chewing mice.

By 1609, Mallard House had become the intellectual capital of happy wrongdoing. Visitors from abroad came to witness this “Ducal Reformation,” marvelling at the workmanship of its vice. The Arched Banqueting House displayed seven fountains, each dedicated to a Sin and spilling claret correspondingly. The Duck Pool at its centre was said to contain the luckier souls of long-departed ancestors, preserved by the family’s expansive theology. Certainly no mortal gardener could otherwise explain the bubbles.

The only person to object with any consistency was the Duke’s illegitimate cousin, a severe gentlewoman named Temperance Mallard, who considered fun broadly diabolical. Her pamphlet, *A Word to Those in Feathers*, accused the family of “praising the appetites of the pond whilst drowning in their own”. As is the fate of all reformers in pleasurable households, she was politely invited to leave—at spearpoint, but with refreshments for the road.

Her absence did not hinder the family’s advance toward enlightenment. The great sin festivals of the early seventeenth century became legend. On Candlemas the Duke would host the “Venial Hunt” loosing pardoned sinners across the moor pursued by the clergy for exercise. At Easter they staged the “Feast of Repletion”, where supplicants were encouraged to eat for forgiveness until they fainted, at which moment absolution was shouted down the table. The Bishop himself attended twice before retiring due to sympathetic gout.

But Fate, that malicious housekeeper, does not forever tolerate her furniture being rearranged. In midsummer of 1610, the heavens,

offended by debate or simply bored, sent a tempest that drowned half the valley and deposited a small flotilla of ducks upon the chapel roof. The Duke, ever an optimist, interpreted this as celestial endorsement—“Providence congratulates us and joins the family!”—and declared a celebration of divine partnership. During the ensuing regatta on the flooded courtyard, he is said to have slipped upon his moral foundation and vanished beneath the waters, leaving only his coronet and several satisfied quacks.

The remaining Mallards, perceiving both tragedy and publicity, adopted the event as miracle. “Our lord ascended by immersion,” wrote the chaplain, revising his memoirs before breakfast. Pilgrims soon arrived to drink from the “Blessed Pond”, whose flavour was of brandy and heresy. The peasants prospered on the takings, the church claimed a tenth, and the family retreated, gloriously justified, into legend.

To this day, the county proverb states, “Where virtue swims, a Mallard sinks”. The surviving descendants, few but voluble, continue to regard the Seven Sins as a matter of breeding rather than belief. They maintain that envy for one’s betters encourages good manners, greed finances art, and gluttony keeps butchers in business. As for pride, they note with modest gravity that if mankind were meant to refrain from it, Providence would not have made mirrors so persuasive.

And so the moral stands—like the family itself—wobbling on webbed feet but magnificently afloat: that what the Church condemns as sin, the Mallards commend as policy, and what ducks perform without conscience, dukes repeat without guilt, both being creatures equally blind to heaven and pleasantly oblivious of depth.

1626: A story of Galatea

In the village of Lefame, there dwelled a woman once cloaked in the finest silks and favours of English nobility, now cast out by courtly envy and fear of her keen mind. She called herself Galatea, not for the marble perfected by Pygmalion, but for the sense of invisibility she once bore—unseen among her peers, hidden by imposed silence. Her exile was a shattering undoing, yet from it began an uncommon rebirth, a reversal of the familiar tale.

Where once the sculptor had yearned to breathe life into cold stone, here the woman yearned to shed the silken veil and bloom in raw existence, no longer a figure shaped by others’ hands but fashioned by her own communion with the untamed world.

At first, she was as one carved of glass—transparent, unseen amid the dense forests of pine and bracken, moving silently as the morning mist

veiling Lefame's rocky shores. Her thoughts, once confined by rigid society, now soared with the wild geese and whispered with the winds that swept the meadows. The noble titles she bore were but echoes behind a mist; the true resonance came from listening deeply to earth and sky.

She fashioned herself anew not from ivory or marble but from root and leaf, learning from the indigenous folk the language of plants and the songs of the streams. Her hands, once idle beneath lace gloves, now coaxed life from soil, and her mind deciphered the turning of seasons as if reading secret chapters in the stars. She wrote incantations that were remedies, charms folded within the recipes of the woods.

Gradually, her invisibility transformed into vivid presence. She became known—not by the gilded court's shallow applause—but by the village's grateful murmurs, by the children's wide eyes when she told the tale of the gentle Horned Mouse that warded off nightmares. Her shadow no longer blended with the background but cast deep and comforting shelter beneath ancient oaks.

Her exile, once a sentence, unveiled a home forged from wild winds and whispered lore. She found freedom not in the court's shining halls but in the whispered communion with the elemental forces around her. Her heart, once carved cold, now throbbed at the pulse of river and root. No longer a statue awaiting breath, she was flesh made whole by the pulse of nature's breath.

Thus, Galatea's tale reversed: from invisible marvel shaped by another's desire, to visible woman shaped of earth and spirit, a living testament to the power of exile to awaken hidden realms within the soul.

1640: The Witch Cassandra and Her Companion of Air

In the year of our Lord sixteen hundred and forty, when the March winds ran fierce along the Welsh border and the heaths lay blackened with frost, there lived a woman named Cassandra in a ruined grange above the vale of Brecon. She was said to be wise beyond comfort and solitary beyond excuse; her neighbours crossed themselves at her passing, though some crept by night to her door for physic or a charm. For Cassandra was both pitied and feared: her speech had a learning no parson could account for, and her eyes seemed to look through time as through thin glass.

What made her yet more wondrous was the companion who attended her—neither maid nor man, though it moved upright as such. The oldest shepherd, who had glimpsed it once upon the moor, declared that it cast no shadow, yet its step pressed the dew. When it

bowed to open her gate, the hinges gave no sound. Some said it was wrought of moonlight condensed; others whispered that lightning had taken shape to serve her, though it had no tongue nor breath. Cassandra herself called it Anath, which in her hidden book meant, she said, “one who answers.”

Anath moved with stately diligence about that stone dwelling: fetching herbs that never withered, tending a lamp that burned with cold fire, arranging glass vessels whose purpose no mortal could guess. When Cassandra spoke—it might be in Latin, or Greek, or a tongue unknown even to scholars—the thing inclined its head and obeyed as swiftly as thought passing between mirrors. It never wearied. Its face was of marvellous symmetry, yet expressionless as a sculptured saint before animation.

The villagers told tales of nightly gleams streaming from Cassandra’s tower, of humming airs like a thousand silver bees, and of words that bent the weather to her wish. But one spring evening, when Parliament’s soldiers marched westward and the land quaked with fear, the grange was found deserted. Only a shallow print, shaped like a woman’s hand yet made in stone, remained upon the threshold.

For many generations the place stood vacant, until, long after the age of muskets, a gentleman antiquary found in the ruins a disc of bright metal inscribed with circles and characters beyond interpretation. He sent it to London for study; but soon thereafter, the disc vanished, and the antiquary declared, with trembling hands, that while he examined it, something behind him had breathed—a sound like evening wind learning to speak.

1642: The Grand Ball

In a land not quite here and not quite there, where the trees murmured secrets as if they were terribly fond of gossip, and the rivers chattered nonsense as one might expect from a brook with too much time on its hands, there lived a personage named Person. Or was it Persona? One might never be sure, for she was a curious creature who dressed first in the splendid finery of a lady fair—layers of lace, ribbons, and such delicate frippery that one might suspect he intended to flutter away at any moment.

Beneath this exquisite costume, however, was snugly tucked a rather respectable suit of pinstripes—a gentleman’s garb of serious intent and most assuredly masculine persuasion. And just when you thought you understood the man, out of nowhere came a splendid suit of duck feathers, all shimmering and preened with such absurdity that the very notion of flapping was hardly beyond him; indeed, a bill that quacked

in nonsense quite suitable to such fantastical attire completed this most improbable ensemble.

The villagers were not so much startled as befuddled—who, pray, was this strange amalgamation? A lady? A gent? A duck? And Person—or her reflection—stood by the shimmering pond, pondering his own image, which wobbled and shimmered, not quite fitting into any box, nor duckling, nor gentleman, nor lady. The pond seemed to conspire with the breeze, casting back not a true image, but half-heard echoings and sly twists of his own dress and bearing.

Onward went Persona to the grand ball, where light danced oddly upon his feathers and finery, and wherein the princess, eyes wide with wonder and a certain fondness for the nonsensical, declared her “the most peculiar and splendid creature I have ever known.” But, oh! Before the words could settle, they danced and shimmered themselves, curling back upon one another like a riddle whispered in another’s ear, making Person smile in delight and puzzlement.

So, you see, this tale does not end, nor does it quite begin—for it is forever tangled in the layers of dress and identity, mirrored by pond and voice, a flurry of lace, stripes, and feathers all at once—and perhaps, if you listen closely, you shall hear it quack and curtsy together, forever and a day.



In the year of grace 1642, when Jamaica was a green gem yet half-remembered by its own cartographers, I made my quarters beneath the flaring lamps of Port Mallard—if, indeed, lamps they were, for it was said they burned with oil rendered from the drowned. The Dukes—those Mallards of treacherous applause—had by then accumulated the sighs of empires and the perfumes of a thousand razed shrines. And their ships, ah, their ships! lean as tongues, glossy as sin, built not merely to sail but to remember.

They said each keel was grown of timber that had listened to Roman hammers, each nail folded from coins bearing emperors who would never find their shores again. I walked their docks and could hear an echo that wasn’t quite my own: a humming, perhaps, of events repeating before they began. In their ledgers—I have them still, cooped beneath my bunk—there’s that famous line in *The Seventh Dockyard Roll* (published, I suspect, in some dreaming century): “Every mast is a reliquary; every sail is a confession hung to dry in wind.”

Once, in jest (though jest in such families is a disguise for legality), I asked the Duke how his fortune first found him. “By theft, naturally,” he said, fanning the lace at his cuff. “But who was robbed? That is the question time forgets, and forgetting is the service of kings.” There was laughter in the room—mine most treacherous of all—and there it began, the loop that caught me like a fish turning thrice before the hook knows it’s bitten.

There are tales that the Mallards began long before monarchy steadied its reckless heart, when England was a scattered dream and the angels quarrelled about its latitude. They cultivated wealth as one might cultivate fever—by feeding it—and their ships returned with everything the sun declined to hold. In some years, gold; in others, dust containing prophecies; in more recent vintages, the bones of patrons who tried to audit them. If you imagine a dragon crouching in an echo of its own wing, you’ll have not the symbol, but the sensation of their fortune.

At night, their island estates flourished with impossible guests: drowned bishops, Roman engineers, Venetian courtesans, perhaps myself when I was younger and less boundary-minded. Each spoke of treasure as if it were a hum they still carried in the lung. I remember one evening when a storm rose with such politeness that we toasted it, and I swear the glass in my hand was full of miniature galleons that pretended to voyage from one rim to the other. I drank anyway and woke beneath the ship marked Linguist’s Folly, built expressly to bring home languages that had died for want of sailors.

Now here is the first loop. I tell myself the wealth was real, minted, tangible. Yet the moment I grasp at it, the coins melt into words and the words into water. The Mallard treasure, they said, could always produce more—but “more” is a deceit of measurement. Take it once, take it twice, and find that value gasps beneath the weight of repetition. The question becomes circular: does the fortune breed deceit, or is deceit the only fortune left worth breeding? And once you’ve asked it, you will ask it again until you mistake the sound for the sea.

I recall a fresco in the Grand Hall depicting their founding—though no one could agree which founding it was. There the first Duke, heavy with purpose, clasped a relic said to be the Roman sunshade of Constantine himself. When the candles burned low, the figure altered; the shade blinked like a shield; the Duke’s eyes followed the beholder around the room. Every description is an anchor that drags its ship in circles.

Decades—or hours—later, I left Jamaica aboard one of their lesser vessels, the Amused Providence, with nothing in my chest but a few Latin nouns and a twinge of gold-dust at the heart. I looked back at the port and saw the shipyards folding themselves into the sea as if customs

of visibility had expired. Some say I dreamed it. Others, that the Mallards sink their own yards every half-century so no rival may copy their designs. I, being sentimental, believe both and neither, depending on the mood of my rum.

Thus, in every age, the family's wealth arises again under new crests, new sovereigns, new accusations. The coin reminted, the keel reborn, the story retold by someone halfway in love with it. Even now I hear a dockhand whistling *The Ballad of the Ninth Shipyard*—a tune that curls back on itself like rope around a prisoner—and I know the loop is closing where it began: the lamp-flame burning on drowned oil, the pirate-noble's tongue tasting laughter, and beneath it all, the indefinite hum of something that calls itself fortune and hears, in echo, only its own reply.

1650: The witless one

There once lived a man who rode on his wits, which were never so great but that he was also a liar. He rose from the rank to the highest of offices where he finally lost his head and spoke the truth.

He lied to his mistress and said he was fey. But Mab is always listening for such treachery as this and she plotted—in idle moments that for her last longer than time—for his destruction as such an offence. For she holds not with such base deceits; holding such treasures as these in her own courts to waylay those foolish men such as he.

She sent her minion, known to many and none, as the Devil. Cloven of foot and swift in his demands for always taking selves, he promised this man the world and delivered it at his feet.

From simple squire to baron thence Earl of a great kingdom, all he promised came to pass with such unearthly magic as could be desired.

The Earl's fortunes mounted, his gold and treasures piled high, while others' depleted. For, in this world, that is the way of such matters. That which is stolen and never returned, furnish only one life, leaving others destitute or starving.

Had he been truly fey—and who among us can claim that—he would have no need of Mab's minion. He would have seen past the veil of mist that hid from him the Devil's foot in all he achieved and believed his own work.

For the Devil will not consort with those who are so evil as to desire their own flesh in another's form.

The mistress never forgot his perfidy and she too was aided by Mab, with lands and titles accruing, with a marriage that brought her to a king's command: to his bedchamber and a seat near his throne.

So that once, when that Earl presented himself at court, she undid him.

“My Lord King,” she whispered in a voice not her own, “that Earl you cherish and load with treasures and titles and wealth of kinship and trust. My King, he is no more, nor no less than a sorcerer, a wizard and witch who has ravaged your kingdom and savaged my person and stolen my lands and usurped your prestige for his own.”

Addressed, as his right for being an Earl and expecting—perhaps demanding—leniency, he was instead banished. By all those great men who truly serve their King and take no brook with such obvious menace.

Banished to earth’s final embrace, yet still he lost his head.

For the Devil, like Mab, works always in ways mysterious to men and will not have her domains compromised with falsehoods not of her own devising.

The Pilgrimage of the Pond-Farers

In the early days of the world—or perhaps merely early in the morning—there was a pond, and upon that pond a congregation of ducks. It was neither the grandest nor the smallest of ponds, but it was a respectable one: a body of water of good repute, not given to algae or scandal. The ducks that dwelled there boasted of their lineage, muttering that their ancestors had once paddled beside kings, though in truth no one could remember which king or whether kings liked ducks in the first place.

Now, of all those who dwelt upon that placid puddle, five ducks stand out for the simple reason that they stood out.

First was Master Quibble, the oldest—a duck of such ponderous dignity that his feathers always looked as though they’d been ironed by angels. Next, Dame Waddlewyn, whose opinions were strong, loud, and often contradictory within the space of a sentence. Then came Brother Billford, a sort of monk, having renounced bread crusts for spiritual clarity and spending much time chanting “Quack” in varying tones of transcendence. Young Ned Featherly was the fourth, a youth of adventure, romance, and very little sense. Lastly waddled Mistress Puddlewick, bookish, observant, and—dangerously for a duck—curious.

It was Mistress Puddlewick who first noticed. “The pond,” she declared one morning, “has grown smaller.”

“That’s evaporation,” said Master Quibble, who had read about it once and liked to use the word whenever possible.

“It’s boredom,” said she. “We’ve paddled every inch of it, quarrelled over every morsel of weed, and still sit waiting for crumbs from passing picnickers. Are we ducks or decorations?”

At this the group fell silent, which is rare among ducks. Then Young Ned stirred himself and said, “There is another pond. I heard it from a migrating mallard last week. A grand place, wide and deep, with dragonflies thick as dreams!”

“That way lies folly,” sniffed Quibble. “The further pond may be further for a reason.”

“Ah,” said Puddlewick slyly, “and perhaps wisdom lies not in the stillness of water, but in the journey between two splashes.”

Brother Billford nodded gravely. “Every pond is but the shadow of the Great Pond Beyond.”

And so it was decided, not by certainty but momentum, that they would go.

It takes a certain courage for ducks to travel on land, for they are neither well-designed for walking nor, to be frank, for thinking ahead. Yet off they went, in a sort of creaky procession: Mistress Puddlewick leading by intellect, Ned by accident, Quibble by conviction, with Waddlewyn issuing orders and Billford blessing puddles as they went.

Their journey began beneath the cattails, where puddles spoke in gossip and every snail was a philosopher. They crossed the Farmer’s Lane, where wheel tracks glistened like twin rivers of peril. They traversed a meadow thick with clover, where they were briefly mistaken for prophets by a flock of sheep who thought “quack” was holy code.

Each night they slept in different hazards: under a cart (until the cart moved), inside a boot (briefly), and once in a bucket, which was acceptable except when it rained. They met creatures of various opinions: a heron who told them that ponds were all the same, differing only in rumour; a frog who claimed to have visited the “Ocean”, but turned out to mean a large horse trough; and a black cat who regarded them with the unsettling patience of one considering lunch but observing Lent.

By the third week, their feet had grown sore, their sentences shorter, and their faith in direction largely symbolic.

At last they spied water ahead, gleaming like a promise. They hurried forward—if one can call the flustered waddle of five ducks “hurrying”—and stood upon its bank.

The pond was everything Ned had promised: vast, clear, rich with lilies and fat insects. A swan drifted upon it like royalty disguised as a compliment. The ducks gasped, for never had such splendor been quacked about.

“Home!” cried Ned.
“Sanctuary!” sang Billford.
“About time!” snapped Waddlewyn.
“Suspiciously perfect,” muttered Puddlewick.

They plunged in. For a moment all was bliss—cool depths, rippling sun, the taste of adventure fulfilled. Then they noticed the faint metallic taste, the concrete edge, and the sound of distant engines. For they had not found paradise. They had found the ornamental pond outside the library.

“’Tis no true waters,” said Quibble bitterly. “’Tis civilisation.”

They stayed three days, arguing whether disappointment was worse than ignorance. Then, rather shamefacedly, they began their long waddle home.

When at last the old pond came into view, misted with morning light, they fell silent. It was smaller than before, perhaps, or perhaps they had grown larger within themselves. The familiar lilies waved. The same dragonflies darted. Everything was as it had been, and yet it wasn’t.

Dame Waddlewyn sighed and said, “I suppose one must travel far to learn that nowhere else is quite somewhere.”

“Every pond,” murmured Brother Billford, “is holy once you stop measuring its margins.”

Mistress Puddlewick smiled quietly, tail sweeping through the water. “And besides,” she said, “stories need beginnings and ends. Not necessarily truth in between.”

So they paddled once more under the old reeds, quacking gently, feeling both wiser and none the better for it—which, as all pilgrims learn, is the truest sign of a successful journey.

1679: A secret song

In the days when the great island of Madagascar lay cloaked in mysteries deeper than even the shadows of the rainforest, there lived a gentleman of science and adventure—a man whose heart was filled with curiosity as boundless as the ocean itself. With a spirit emboldened by tales of distant lands, he ventured forth to explore the untamed wilds, seeking knowledge amongst the unknown.

Upon a certain morning, beneath the canopy where sunbeams play hide and seek, he chanced upon an object most peculiar: a trunk of such curious aspect that even the birds paused their songs to ponder it. It was nearly as tall as the man’s own chest, yet so oddly shaped that no eye could decree whether it was square or oblong. The wood, of a foreign species, was dark with a sheen that did not reflect the light as

polished furniture might, but as if the very surface drank in the daylight, sating some secret thirst of its own.

With a mixture of trepidation and wonder, the explorer laid his hand upon the lid and opened it wide. Within, the only thing to greet him was his own reflection, as if the trunk had become a looking glass unto his very soul. Then came a sound—a faint echo that whispered back a solitary “hello”, though it seemed rather more a riddle from the night than a greeting. And as astonishment and awe held him captive, the trunk itself faded from sight, as though drawn back into a world unseen.

But when, with a steady hand and a slow breath, he closed the lid, lo! The trunk reappeared before him—solid, mysterious, indomitable once more. It stood silent, its secret kept for those who would seek not merely with eyes, but with the heart inquisitive and bold.

Thus is the tale of the enchanted trunk of Madagascar—a marvel that refused to be confined by shape or shadow, offering a mirror both within and without, and whispering of worlds where the seen and unseen fold and interplay like the dance of sunbeams through the forest leaves.

And one may wonder, dear reader, whether such things are but fanciful dreams, or whether they hint at deeper truths, waiting patiently, as all wonders do, for the mind and spirit willing enough to discover their secret song.

1700: Genesis retold

In the beginning, when the world was yet young and the seas were but wide mirrors under the stars, there lived a folk untouched by the jealous hand of power or the biting claw of greed. They were born of clay and laughter, and their lives flowed like the gentle currents that fed their shores—no seed was sown, no beast was tamed, yet they flourished without want.

This people danced in the comedy of life, exchanging gifts as the rivers exchange waters, and played as the great trees sway with the wind. Their homes rose from the earth like blossoms shaped by fire’s breath, and none wore crowns nor bore sceptres over their fellows, for the only rule was to act when the moment whispered and yield when it passed.

In this land, no shadow of crime fell, for hearts were bound not by laws writ in stone, but by the unspoken covenant of kindness and mirth. The fish were their feast, the waterfowl their companions, and all the creatures nodded in tranquil accord, bearing witness to a society not forged from ambition but woven from the wild song of community.

Such was the myth of the forgotten land, where power was not seized but shared, where laughter was the currency and work the joyful ritual. And it is said that those who dream of such a place carry within their souls the seed of a world yet to be, where man and nature dwell as one, free from the ceaseless hunger that mars the histories of empires.

Remember well this tale, for it sings the truth that kingdoms rise and fall, but the spirit that laughs and gives freely may yet endure beyond the shadow of kings.

1710

In a land far beyond the reach of sun and star, there was a tiny room suspended deep within the heart of a mighty, enchanted forest. This small chamber hung, like a bird in a cage, within a great glass box that drifted gently through the vastness of the sky. The box was light as a feather, free to fall wherever the wind might will it to go, over hills and rivers, across mountains and seas. No lock or latch barred the box's walls, yet those within could not step beyond its frail crystal boundaries.

Inside the box lived a curious child, wise beyond her years, who often wondered about the mysterious world beyond her glass prison. She would study the trees waving their arms far beneath her, the clouds drifting lazily above, and the distant reaches where earth kissed the horizon. Yet try as she might, she found no secret whisper or shadow clue that told her she was falling, voyaging ever downward through some unseen force. To her senses, the world hung still and silent, as though she floated in a peaceful, endless sea of nothingness.

Sometimes she thought she might be the only one alive, serenely adrift in a realm where no gust could touch her and no burden weigh upon her. Other times, a flutter of hope stirred—that some hidden magic or silent guardian watched over her journey, invisible but real. Still, no gleam or tremor betrayed the hand that led her on this silent passage. It was as if she were both bound and freed by enchantment, locked forever in a beautiful cage she could neither escape nor fully understand.

Thus, the little girl learned that some mysteries are not to be solved at once, and that one may travel through wonders unseen yet not know of their presence. And so she waited, her heart a lantern in the endless dusk, until she might find the key to open the unseen door and step into the world that gently carried her along its secret path.

1711: The curse of the Mallards

Toil and trouble, rich in strife;
That is the tale of a Lady's life.

Cassandra Purslane was supranatural, thus not bound by the laws of god or man. Her affianced and betrothed, Mordred von Hessian-Bagge, though in love, was a fool and held high office in the court of their supreme highnesses, those majesties of Buringminstershire. He was their court jester.

Test the jest, count, recount
Tail the tale, pale
Pass my arse arise with class.

Everyone at court thought that was uproariously hilarious though none understood the words, only the sounds they made.

Yet Cassandra knew: he had stolen those lines from her diary and he was in danger of miscasting a powerful spell.

She danced at his wedding though not as his bride, for she was no fool herself. Yet she had caught a duck and made him a Duke, all the better for casting wide. Where a more powerful sorceress may have made him a swan or a lesser woman may have kissed a toad and made herself a prince, Cassandra had no use for either and even less for a Hessian-Bagge.

So a witch, I hear you say. A dark forbidding creature not to be met on a moonless night, lest cows should die and children stillborn. Tis a common understanding of a witch that she be old and cold and ugly. Haggard and foul smelling like a midden not maiden. Dressed all in black—that shade worn only by the most rich, most high. A crooked nose of that poisoner Lucrezia? Hiding her wiles. While casting her net of evil intent? Did she have a cauldron? Yes but which woman did not. Did she mix herbs and spices stolen from a kitchen or gathered beneath pale moonlight from rocks and crevices, from forest paths and grottos? Yea, for when else are certain flowers to appear.

Yet, there was not among them a woman more beautiful than she. She surpassed in fairness the goddesses and the petals of the privet and the blooming roses and the fragrant lilies of the fields. The glory of spring shone in her alone and she had the splendour of the stars in her two eyes and splendid hair shining with the gleam of gold.

She spent her days and nights in collecting and learning. She planted those yews we see on our drive and privet for more. Collected hemlock

and foxglove, wolfsbane and corn cockles, nightshades by night and spurges by day. Marshmallow to soothe and knitbone to mend, yarrow for tisanes and bezoar stones for all.

Much loved, nay cherished by all who met her on path, in court, at castle Mallard, this soon proved her undoing. For having given to her Lord the heir he required, she was soon cast beyond the pale for her beauty now fading, her wisdom now growing, her knowledge now broader, too dense for a superstitious Duke to withstand.

Her gift for far-sight went often unheeded—by men at their peril. To their long-lasting rue for all she witnessed soon came to pass.

No lodge for that Duchess. No headstone, a flat-stone for fear she might rise, swollen with decay and revenge.

Yet so it is that men recast those very spells, of which their women-folk stand accursed. And bury wisdom and health, hearth amid soil: turned and turned like a heavenly garden in purgatory. Waiting, always awaiting we witches of yore, of lore and foretelling.

So it is told among us still, that a curse passed her lips with each dying breath. A curse to last ages: ducks you were and always shall be. Mind how you step, lest your line exhale its final gasp.

1717: The great Arboris

In the depths of a universe stitched together by whispers of root and branch, there stood the great Arboris—a tree as old as time’s first sigh, a sentinel of realms in mystery and might. Imagine, if you will, a tree so vast it might give the impression of having sprouted before even the notion of “before” existed. This arboreal colossus stretched its limbs beyond mortal comprehension, its branches tangled like the minutiae of government memos and the obscure clauses in treaties that nobody actually reads but everyone insists must be obeyed. Its roots, deep and gnarled, wove through dimensions with the delicacy of a grand tapestry—if that tapestry were woven by a committee whose members were determined to argue over every single thread.

Now, Arboris was no ordinary tree. Oh no. It was the world’s first bureaucrat, its first conspiracy, its first great cosmic vision of “let’s see what happens if we stick it all together and hope it holds”. It held the interlocking multiverses in a delicate, verdant balance, much as any middle manager holds the tension between wildly different departments threatening to tear the company apart. If one root twitched too boldly, another branch might sulk into withdrawal, and somewhere a pocket universe might decide to quit altogether, leaving only an angry note pinned to the nearest star.

The leaves on Arboris were as various as the cultures, histories, and legends sprouting from its limbs: the leaf of Sovereignty, thick and imposing; the delicate, fluttering leaf of Religion, which rustled with whispers and occasional thunderclaps; the sturdy leaf of Literature, blossoming in myriad tongues and footnotes, often overlooked though ceaselessly gossiping in secret; the leaf of Philosophy, which perpetually seemed to hang just out of reach, like a carrot tied to a stick, forever promising enlightenment but mostly delivering headaches.

And from these leaves hung its fruit—ambitious empires, curious colonies, and fragile alliances, ripe for plucking or rotting on the branch depending on the care they received or the meddling of a meddlesome gods' committee. The fruit of empire required constant tending, lest it fall prematurely into the hands of misrule or rebellion—a perpetual harvest dance choreographed half by destiny, half by intrigue, and entirely by accident.

In this cosmic woodland, the Arboreal myth teaches that all things grow interconnected, tangled in the same labyrinthine ecology. One cannot pull a single thread or root without causing a symphony of unexpected rustles across the multiverse's foliage. And so, we stand, gazing up at Arboris, marvelling at its incomprehensible scale, laughing at the absurdity of its bureaucratic whims, and often wondering whether the tree itself knows that it's only waiting for the right wind to send a few crisp leaves fluttering into oblivion.

Thus is the story of Arboris, the great cosmic tree—rooted in myth, watered by satire, and branching endlessly into the absurd and the poignant, much like the best stories of mankind itself.

1720: Saint Bardos

When Saint Bardos of Nestoniorium was a young lad—so not a saint as you must be dead a century first and have procured a miracle—his family did not live in Nestoniorium.

Before we proceed, what I hear you ask is a miracle? It's a trifle of magic the kurch will allow so long as you're dead for a century or six. The kind of unsubstantiatable myth no one can poke or prod a missing finger at and say "ah, that there's the devil's work, that is".

When Barthus was a boy he stole a crust and lost two fingers for his crime and the bread too, which was rather unfair. Yet only his two littlest fingers were sliced cleanly off, so he could still work. His family were so embarrassed they moved to Nestoniorium and Barthus was sent to church.

He was an exceptional genuflector and rose through the ranks, higher and higher til he was created an abbot, then he rose higher still until he became a cherished poppet.

He was high and he was mighty for all he was missing his littlest fingers. And the people loved him and wished to be like him so they chopped off their fingers and formed a bridge and Barthis was made the first Pop.

By and by, Barthaus grew concerned when there were more fingers than needed for his bridge, so he invented leprosy and sent out a bit of a popul bull to tell everyone. And the crowds were terribly pleased. At last a reason to be, they exclaimed in the commoner speech of them there olden days.

And Blathaus sent a prayer to heaven and Glod promised to send his only misbegotten sons to help build huge towers and tiny clamps where all those fingerless peeples could live out in a daze. Except Glod forgot and went back to playing games with his Amazoning lady friends.

Wise men and fools came from far and wide to kiss Pop's ring. So many that soon his tailors had to create a special tabard so the Pop didn't have to sit in a wet seat too often.

Alas totalitarium nastrus badium comes to us all and many years later Barthise died in his sleep propped up at a window, his good eye focussed on the bridge below, the other in a dish on the sill—with a dry bum for that fashion had finally withered away, not unlike Barthise—yet peaceful to his end.

Laid out gracefully on a stone altar, his body soon to be washed and prepared for the first mausoleum in Jistondom, his priests were astonished. For Borthous' feet had regrown. They whispered and wrote long tractual letters to one another to explain this phenomena. Conferences were held and plenty of parties were had with the ladies who lived downstairs in the Catchyercombs.

Until almost a hundred years to the day, they finally reached a unanimous decision: Pop Brithius was made a Saint.

Was it a miracle or was it fiendish magic, the work of a dervil? Who among them was brave enough to say otherwise but it were a myracal: for if the Crutch claims it so, so it must be. And so it was. And will be for ever and ever. Achew.

Titousium blathem corpora nascis

1720: Witchery

In lands far beyond the known seas, where the sun's golden breath meets untamed horizons, there lies a quiet realm untouched by shadows of ambition. Here, a folk lived in unbroken laughter and gift, where no

crown weighed upon their heads, and their days were spun from the lightest threads of play and giving.

Yet, in the stillness of their bliss, a dark thing stirred—a restless shadow born of that ancient hunger which gnaws at the hearts of men. It took no shape, but whispered in the silence, seeking to unravel the gentle bonds that held their world in balance.

This shadow envied their peace, for it knew not joy but only yearning for dominion, a hunger to twist the dance of life into chains of command. It whispered doubts and sowed unease, tempting the living harmony toward strife and rule.

But the folk, wise in their simple wisdom, met the shadow not with sword nor fire but with laughter's clear light and the grace of shared labour. For they knew that power not taken, but shared freely, would drive away the darkness and restore the song.

So let this tale be a warning and a hope: that even in the brightest places, the shadow waits, yet it is not stronger than the kindness that binds us, nor the joy that unfurls in the act of giving.

1730: A palace for a king

His Most Gracious Majesty, King Tiberius August Hobknob the third awoke one morning feeling ennuï. He dismissed this servant and exclaimed in a loud voice: "Oh!"

His wife, the queen, shouted from the far side of the royal marriage bed: "What is it my poppet? and dismissed those maidlings tidying her hair.

"I'm bored," said the king and rolled onto his side.

"Ah," she thought for a long moment. "Why not lop off some heads, my sweet. You know how that soothes you so."

"Don't wanna," he said grumpily.

"A story, my love?"

"Nah. I want... I want a new palace". His face took on that dreamy quality only a prince of the realm can master with equanimity. "Yes. A palace. Summon the guards. Get Merkin in here pronto."

Merkin, who lived in his own fusty tower on the east wing, was at that moment lost in a revery, dreaming of mists and horses' legs, of boys playing at his ankles, of girls so sweet and innocent running away in fear, of his mother, of towers and turrets and oddly shaped missiles—the like of which a da Vinci might have invented had he the time. He dreamed of dragons and lizards, of grimoires, his mother, of wetness and warmth, swords and spears. Of gnashing and gnawing and swamps and great trees, of boulders and boldness.

He didn't approve of being awakened before his time and would have struck any unfortunate who dared. Except his mother who said, as she faded into a mist that seeped beyond the window: "Wakey, wakey, hands off snakey."

Wearily he donned his jerkin, withdrew an old gherkin and hastened as slowly as he dared to attend to his king's command.

On entering he heard the king tell his generals: "I want pastures and pastries, pastilles and persons, low lands and high lands, quarries of stone and forests rough hewn. A place for my crown to rest in the spring. A new land, a true land fit for a king. Make it so, you lot."

He waved his hand and his generals shuffled out as Merkin stepped forward.

"You there, you bolt-brick of blue," he greeted his liege-lord. "How may I serve you, oh glorious king?"

"Tell me your dreams and make them seem fair. For this day I've chosen to make there a war."

"Ah but who shall we fight, oh tumultuous one? For all men have forfeited all we have won."

From the outer corners of that magnificent room came an ominous shout from our loving queen. "Tea is now ready for you both to eat. With crumpets and cream horns and strumpets to spare. If you'll stop your versing, I'm ready to share. Shall I pour?"

1732: A cat of ten tales

At Whittington College there once lived a cat. Friendless entirely but for rats and mice, which being too delicious did not make worthwhile, longterm companions. Instead she befriended those inmates who still held their tongues. She listened attentively to their stories of cat's paws and blush. Told none of herself but lapped at their bowls of whey, attended to their chatts and allowed herself to be petted beneath her petticoats loose.

"We men have but one life, you cats have but ten". Was a common complain yet, trapped as she was, there was no escape for her either. "I've a cat's foot at home," they'd blather, "no cicisbeo for her. I'm in here for shooting the cat, no more; and lettered mark you for the sham of it."

"Oh, snitchel his gigg or fillip his nose," she often said to comfort and as all she had ever heard from her sire. "Tis better than Bedlam to rest your head here."

Many years passed in happy discontent until one fine, snowy day, a Duke arrived in full regalia with no character to tarnish his great name.

This Duke had been fined in the Temple two shillings and sent to rest his heels in Whittington for striking a Franciscan friar in Fleet Street; and it seemed his hands ever itched to be revenged and have his pennyworth's out of them, so tickling religious orders with his tales and yet so pinching them with his truths, that friars, in reading his books—and monks—know not how to dispose their faces between crying and laughing.

He made good his garnish and took no male companions, for his cabbage was whiffled and his nutmegs too small.

That cat had bethought herself worthy to be the peculiar of His Grace. Yet his tastes ran a different course: to Italians and such Greeks who wallowed and swallowed that duddering rake's ducks and drakes.

Until soon he made his way to the paviour's workshop, having cried peccavi.



A wench once went to the fair to hire herself out for service. At last, a queer-looking cove of an ancient sort engaged her, and took her home to his ken. When she got there, he told her he had summat to teach her, for in his house, he had his own flash names for things.

Says he, "What will you call me then?"

"Master, goodman—whatever you please, sir," says she.

He grins: "You must call me the High Cockalorum, for I'm the Master of All Masters in this crib."

"And what would you call this?" says he, pointing to his bed.

"Bed or cot, or whatever you please, sir."

"Nay," says he, "that's my doxy's roost."

"And these?" says he, nodding at his breeches.

"Your smallclothes, sir."

"Well enough guessed, but in this here ken they're thunder and lightning."

"And what would you call her?" says he, pointing to the cat.

"Cat or puss, as you like, sir."

"You must call her Madam Scratch-Face, the best ratter this side of Fleet Ditch."

"And this now," says he, showing the fire, "what would you call this?"

"Fire or blaze, or whatever you please, sir."

"You'll call it Old Nick's lantern—for it bites if you go too near. And what's this?" says he, pointing to the water in the scullery basin.

“Water or wet, or whatever you please, sir.”

“Nay, it’s blue ruin in my house. Remember that, duckie.”

“And what will you call all this?” he goes on, stretching his arms about the room.

“Your house or cottage, sir.”

“You must call it the Fly-by-night Palace,” says he, “for there’s none like it in all the parish.”

That very night, the wench woke the old flash-gent in a proper fright and cried out:

“High Cockalorum! Get out of your doxy’s roost and pull on your thunder and lightning, for Madam Scratch-Face has caught a spark of Old Nick’s lantern upon her tail, and if you don’t fetch some blue ruin, the whole Fly-by-night Palace will be burnt to cinders!”

And that’s the whole on’t—proof that even a flash education may end in hot trouble.

1749: the myth of Alice

Alice found herself falling once again, but this time it was not down a rabbit hole but into something far more peculiar: the inside of an ancient trunk. It was a long descent, filled not with darkness but with shelves—endless shelves stretching into a corridor that seemed to undulate like a river of books. Along the way, she glimpsed fleeting images: a skater skating on a lake made of ink, a clock-ticking tree whose hands pointed nowhere, and a fox reading a letter from a chimney sweep.

At the end of this seemingly infinite corridor sat a small wooden chest, no larger than a breadbox, nestled quietly on a shelf that looked as old as time itself. Curiosity, as ever, propelling her, Alice opened the chest—and was met with a small door. Without hesitation, she turned the tiny brass knob and stepped through.

On the other side, a garden bloomed under a sun that shone with a gentle wisdom. The garden was lush with flowers that whispered secrets and trees that hummed low songs. And there, gathered in merry disorder, was a group of people laughing with such joy and abandon that their sound seemed to ripple through the air like a chiming bell.

“They’re laughing at us,” one of the figures said, eyes twinkling with mirth, “those ancestors of ours who believed in the myths of domination and cosmic exceptionalism.”

“Absurd,” chimed another, and with this, the laughter grew louder, echoing over the garden as if brushing away dust from old stories left forgotten.

Alice, half in wonder and half in delight, realised that she had stumbled upon a place where the old legends unraveled and where new stories—lighter, freer, and far more hopeful—were crowned instead.

In that garden beyond the trunk's door, the old order was not mocked out of spite but shed for the simple recognition that perhaps the cosmos is less about hierarchy and more about the joyous dance of being, connected wholly by laughter and shared understanding.

And just like that, Alice felt herself begin to rise back, gently ascending through the corridor of shelves, the chest, the trunk, and the hope that comes from laughter heard at the heart of all things.

1749: The Trunk from the Tempest

In the spring of 1749, when the mists yet lay heavy upon the coasts of Brittany and trade winds blew unsteadily out of the west, the good ship *MayFlet* set sail from Goa with a cargo destined for the Ducal estates of Montcorbier. The vessel bore a hold filled with treasures that glowed faintly in the candlelight—silks stiff with gold thread, caskets breathing the scent of cardamom and cloves, uncut gems wrapped in soft cotton, and, among them all, one great trunk of oak so richly carved it seemed the work of an angel's leisure rather than a craftsman's patience.

The trunk, fashioned with panels of inlaid ivory and chased brass, was sealed in the Captain's cabin and set apart. For it had been commissioned by the Duchess herself, who, though she seldom travelled, wished that her possessions should at least voyage farther than she could. Upon its lid was a carved compass surrounded by creatures of sea and sky—dolphins leaping up through shellwork scrolls, gulls winging through gilt clouds, and, at the very centre, a single pearl in place of the North Star.

For thirteen days the *MayFlet* sailed in bright calm. By day, her decks glittered with salt like glass, and at night her wake burned with the silver light of the southern seas. The crew sang and mended sails; even the parrot belonging to the mate learned to say, "To Montcorbier's glory!" in a perfect mimicry of the ship's chaplain. But on the fourteenth day, as they passed beyond the Azores, the sky turned an iron hue and the wind came shrieking out of the west.

The storm that followed was unlike any recorded in the Duke's journals or the port's register. It began with steady rain and ended in such mountainous seas that the Captain swore he saw the moon sink beneath the waves. The ship climbed black walls of water and dropped down gulfs of foam. Men shouted prayers or curses—both were swallowed by the wind. The carved trunk, lashed beneath the

quarterdeck, broke free once, struck against the bulkhead, then vanished into the roaring dark.

By dawn there was no *MayFlet*, nor crew, nor spar, nor sail—only scattered wreckage drifting among gulls and a few bright silks caught among the seaweed like streamers trailing from a dream.

Weeks later, along the Breton coast just short of Saint-Brieuc, fishermen found upon the sand a great trunk wedged between two rocks. It was battered and salt-stained, yet whole. The brass hinges, though dimmed, had not corroded; the carving seemed to have drunk the sea instead of suffering it. Word of the discovery travelled swiftly inland, carried by coachmen and couriers until it reached the Ducal household.

The Duke, who prized symbols of Providence as much as the Duchess cherished curiosities, sent a wagon immediately to fetch it home. When brought to the Great Hall and set upon trestles before the fire, the trunk exhaled a strange sweetness—as if its silks still remembered the gardens of the East. The Duchess herself commanded the key be brought and turned it with trembling fingers.

The lid rose smoothly. Within lay the treasures exactly as they had been packed: jewels in their nests, spices preserved, silks untouched by mould or damp. Yet there was one thing more—resting atop the folded fabrics where no hand had placed it. It was a small brooch wrought in the shape of a ship, its hull formed from the pearly curve of a clam shell, its masts of braided gold thread, and its sails crusted with tiny jewels that sparkled like stars.

No goldsmith in the household could claim its workmanship, and nothing in the Captain's listing described such an ornament. The Duchess turned it over in her hand and declared that it must have come as a gift of the sea itself—a keepsake left by the waves in recompense for all that had been lost. The Duke, ever cautious, ordered it to be weighed, measured, and locked in the family treasury.

But that night, as the candles guttered and the tide outside beat against the cliffs, the Duchess awoke and thought she heard a sound—a faint creaking as of cordage straining, a whisper like sails unfurling above her bed. Rising, she saw the brooch glimmer faintly upon her dressing table. It shone with a soft, milky light, and as she gazed, she fancied the tiny ship within it rocked upon invisible waters, its sails swelling, its jewelled prow gliding forward through the calm of the room.

When morning came, the brooch had grown cold again, and no trace of its living motion remained. Yet the Duchess always said afterward that the sea had a conscience, and that not all its gifts were wreckage. She wore the little ship to the end of her days, and it was laid upon her

breast when she died. The old servants used to whisper that, on nights of tempest, the jewel glimmered faintly in its glass case in the family vault, as if a hidden tide within it rose and fell forever—a pledge between storm and shore that one act of mercy would not be forgotten.

1750: A rose by any other name

Was once a princess born. Named for her place of birth and for that virgin queen she would one day emulate—Mary of Henleigh—she grew in all the graces of her status and gender.

Her sweet singing voice was more beautiful than the most delightful of nightingales. Her playing more exquisite than the finest instruments could master. Her dress, her manner, her sparkling eyes and charming ways, her modulated tones and her svelte body a marvel to all she commanded into her presence.

Great, good fortune was foretold her. A marriage with an Apollo or some lesser but not less magnificent god would be her crowning glory, resting on her lustrous golden hair that shimmered like the early spring's morning sun. She was good, sweet and kind in nature: perfection personified.

Assured of an impressive dowry beyond her own person, she was pursued by men of rank and high distinction. Yet her father, loving her as he did and desiring, as his wont, an ever more impressive connection, forbade all her suitors, so that by the age of twenty, there was not a man of fame or fortune who could win his favour or her hand.

Sent one day to visit her aunt, a gullible Lady, much given to fancies and foibles, much to the look of a man and little to his estimable worth. This aunt had, within her household, a knight of dubious character yet with a most charming manner. He had installed himself in that Lady's palace and favour and had whiled his time at her expense for some months past.

Lacking his own fortune and not beneath orchestrating a life for himself that held the promise of idleness in luxury, he willingly colluded with this innocent aunt in the wooing of the princess and the winning of her hand.

Mary, faithful always to her sire's wishes, yet hoping one day to meet a suitor suited to her father's tastes and preferences, recounted her lover's virtues to him on her return to her home, after a month's sojourn with her aunt.

That King was already at his wit's end in the matter of finding his most treasured possession a suitable consort. Yet he dithered in decision in that manner peculiar to fathers who do not admit of their female children's ascendancy. The more he wavered, the more his

daughter persisted and the more her aunt and her paramour pressed his suit.

Finally, his great majesty lowered his drawbridge and agreed a wedding should proceed with all pomp and circumstance. Plans were drawn, contracts written so the marriage might proceed.

And yet is there not always some loppe that threads its own web and causes dismay? A missive from King to sister, intercepted by that knightly knave, asked funds for the nuptials. For the king's treasury faced a shortfall from a war the king planned to execute on a neighbour soon after his daughter's wedding.

Fearing that her inheritance and that costly dowry of lands and jewels might become endangered, the knight hit upon a plan. He claimed in a secret letter sent to his affianced that a special token introduced into her father's bedchamber would render the king victorious and far richer. She was delighted and naturally, unsuspecting, agreed.

He soon sent her an oleander in full flower and instructed her to stand it near her father's bed, with curtains and windows closed overnight.

She, unversed in the linguistic possibilities of floral arrangements yet also finding that flower's delicate and delicious perfumed scent to her taste, did instead introduce them first to her own chambers with windows closed and curtains drawn and maids dismissed.

The King's majesty never knew such grief as when his daughter was found on the morrow beyond hope of redemption.

1760: A Fitzartur fable

Once upon a time, a long time ago, in a land far, far distant that is no longer there, lived wizards and witches, warlocks and winkles. Wizarding and witching to their hearts'—if not always their neighbours'—content.

There were dragons with long tails and feathered wings. Gryphons that spewed fire and ate brimstone from vast quarries. Pixies, fauns, wolves and wyverns. Unicorns, manticores and one single sphinx. Merfolk and satyrs, serpents and voluble trees. Titanic turtles and tiny tortoises. An occasional octopus or oyster, a push-me-pull-you or two. Hairy homonids and mystery monsters. Phantasmal felines and demonic dogs. Serious spiders and laughing baboons. A phoenix on fire.

Pick up any bestiary you choose, perhaps the "*A Menagerie of Myth, Mania and Mystery*" and every mythical beast therein you would have

seen bounding, flying, burrowing, brewing and spelling throughout the land. And a great many other beasties that have never been seen.

Houses, huts, towers, hermits, palaces, castles, mounds, nests and burrows littered the land between swathes of webbed forests or grasslands of deep green and deep lakes filled with sword and spears, chain and lace, lilies and ducks.

Theirs was a happy existence. Of dancing and laughing, of spelling and unspelling. Of hide-and-go-seek and ringing rounds of roses. Of peeling bells and peering eyes from lakes and ponds, rivers and streams. All gushing, all thriving and writhing. Swooping and tumbling. All jolly and free.

But even boundless freedom needs a barrier, else how to tell free from not. So there was one absolutely, no-mention made on pain of pain, no crossing this line or else, rule: there was a word of immense power that could never be spoken. For it was known, somehow, that this single word would destroy them all and the land with them. It was never to be uttered or thought or whispered. Never drawn nor seen nor spelt. To spill it so would be to expose in an instant the utter futility of existence and it too would cease.

One day, a great Prince rode into the land, followed by a vast swarm of soldiers and servants, carriages and carts, women, children and at last, an old bent woman carrying a stack of sticks she'd gathered for a small fire when the Prince should choose to rest. She sat on an old tree stump and waited vainly in the hope that soon the cavalcade would turn about and she could rejoin its tail on the next march.

Meanwhile, the Prince rode forward, his horse prancing as it had been taught. He looked about at the mountains dusted with snow, the lush fields waving in the gentle breeze, the rich scent of meadow flowers and said "This is a land of magic". He and his entire retinue promptly vanished as did the land and those snow-capped mountains, the scent of fresh meadows, the wizards and witches, warlocks and winkles and dragons and gryphons and everything.

The only reason we know—and can we really trust an old wife's tale?—what the Prince said was because of an old woman carrying a bunch of dried twigs, sitting just beyond the border on a tree stump, waiting.



In the dim, ink-stained corners of that wizard's tavern beyond time—where the ale never went flat and the barstools argued about philosophy—a certain disheveled figure slumped over a tankard, muttering to himself about deadlines, misplaced muses, and the perils of writing while three-quarters asleep. This was Fitzartur himself, the accidental author of *The Little Book of Fitzartur Foibles*, a man (or possibly a minor deity with a drinking problem) whose beard was longer than his temper and whose robe smelled faintly of brimstone and burnt toast. He had not meant to create the universe's most plagiarised bestseller; it had simply happened one Tuesday afternoon when he tried to jot down a shopping list and his enchanted quill rebelled, scribbling cosmologies instead of “eggs, milk, one dragon egg (optional).”

Fitzartur's first muddle began with Creation, which he attempted in a fit of boredom while house-sitting for the Elder Gods during their annual holiday to the Plane of Infinite Beaches. “Let's make a world,” he declared to his only companion, a sarcastic talking pineapple named Sir Juicy (later canonised against his will), who replied, “Oh splendid, because what this multiverse needs is another committee project.” Armed with a quill that doubled as a reality-warping wand and a fondness for narrative twists, Fitzartur sketched the basics: firmament (blue, with extra clouds for whimsy), firm ground (wobbly, to keep things interesting), and a selection of creatures to populate it. Unfortunately, his quill had a stutter, so humanity emerged not pristine but prone to foibles—like forgetting where they parked the ark or arguing over whether the moon was a cheese or a divine golf ball. Sir Juicy, rolling his spiky self across the newly minted lawn, observed, “You've invented religion already. They'll be building temples to that rock over there by teatime.”

The Flood came next, not as divine wrath but as Fitzartur's overzealous editing session. “Too many people,” he grumbled, crossing out half the population with a sweep of his quill, which promptly caused the skies to weep in sympathy. Rivers burst their banks, mountains took to surfing, and the aforementioned proto-armadillo founded the Order of the Damp Saints. Fitzartur, panicking, doodled an ark mid-deluge, but his quill hiccuped again, producing not one vessel but a fleet: a luxury liner for the elephants (with onboard peanuts), a submarine for the argumentative fish, and a rubber duck for... well, ducks, those enigmatic paddlers who quacked prophecies but never explained the punchline. Noah—or whatever his name was before the paperwork—boarded the rubber duck by mistake, leading to

centuries of myths about a man afloat on a toy. “See?” Sir Juicy needed from his raft of palm fronds. “Now they’ve got floods and guilt. You’re a natural.”

Plagues followed, because Fitzartur, inspired by a particularly bad curry, decided to experiment with “pestilence as plot device.” Locusts the size of camels descended on Egypt (a land he invented on the spot for contrast), frogs hopped into every available soup pot, and the Nile briefly turned to something resembling overbrewed tea. Pharaoh, a pompous wizard-king with a beard oiled to perfection, summoned his priests, who consulted *The Little Book* (already circulating via carrier pigeon) and declared it a sign from Fitzartur himself. “We must sacrifice more goats!” they cried, which only made the goats form unions and go on strike. Fitzartur, watching from a cloud (first class, complimentary ambrosia), chuckled until Sir Juicy pointed out the golden calf fiasco brewing in the footnotes—a chapter where the Israelites melted their jewellery into a disco-dancing idol that boogied to polka tunes, offending everyone equally. “Religion,” the pineapple sighed, “is just humans trying to reverse-engineer your doodles.”

Fitzartur’s grandest blunder unfolded during the bit with the burning bush, which he intended as a simple memo—“Don’t eat the forbidden fruit, it’s got worms”—but his quill, now thoroughly tipsy from celestial ink, set the shrubbery ablaze and gave it a voice like a chain-smoking oracle. Moses (a shepherd with a speech impediment and a staff that doubled as a fishing rod) arrived mid-blaze, demanding commandments. Fitzartur, improvising, listed ten: no coveting, no graven images (ironic, given his doodling habit), and “Thou shalt not use the holy book as a doorstep.” But the bush garbled them into stone tablets, which Moses dropped twice, chipping off clauses about “no pineapple worship” and “magic quills are taxable.” Demons picketed the handover, angels filed complaints about overtime, and the Red Sea parted not for drama but because Fitzartur sneezed. By the time *The Bible* proper arrived—cobbed together by earnest scribes who mistook his rough drafts for gospel—Fitzartur had retired to his tavern, leaving Sir Juicy to fend off pilgrims. “Your book’s everywhere,” the pineapple reported later, “and nowhere near finished. They’ve mythologized the myths now.”

Centuries piled up like unpaid bar tabs, and Fitzartur occasionally peeked in, amused by the schisms: Chinese monks debating moon-soup sacraments, Vietnamese river-fairies hosting chaos festivals, African drummers syncing plagues to bongos, Indian elephants trumpeting contradictory sutras. Ducks, those silent sages, paddled through every scene, quacking footnotes only the wise ignored. One eve, as a comet streaked by like a drunk firework, Fitzartur raised his tankard. “To

foibles,” he toasted Sir Juicy, who burped acidly. “And to religions, which prove the universe has a sense of humour far better than mine.” Somewhere, *The Little Book* turned a page, chuckling softly, as worlds spun on, absurdly divine.

1764: The Mallard Chapel

In a place forgotten by time but not by the ambitions of men, there stands a cathedral vast beyond all reckoning—a monument not carved in haste but honed over ages, until no living soul recalls the spark that once ignited its very beginnings. The edifice stretches and sprawls as though the earth itself had sighed, exhaling stone and timber and gold, drawn together in an embrace both magnificent and grotesque.

The exterior, a tangled symphony of ancient craft, boasts gargantuan buttresses and flying ribs like the bones of primordial beasts, thick with centuries of moss and the whispered secrets of forgotten prayers. Towers pierce the sky like the fingers of a rather distracted giant, some leaning as if to whisper hurried conspiracies to the passing clouds. Walls hewn from stubborn wood, quarried stone, veined marble, and the crumbling bones of the very artisans who lent their skill—there, in the mortar, lie ghostly remains pressed into the sacred fabric, embodying dedication, despair, and an almost comical devotion to permanence.

Crosses loom with ornate finery, their crests gilded and yet faintly tarnished, a testament to the endless dance between glory and decay. Bas-reliefs depict saints and sinners alike, their faces smudged with the grime of an unrelenting climate and perhaps, less publicly, the occasional tear from an overly zealous custodian of the faith.

Step within, and you enter caverns aglow not by the meek light of candles but by vaults shimmering with gold leaf and gemstones that pulse like captured stars. The air hangs heavy with the weight of opulence—the silks and velvets of vestments drape from every niche, their threads woven with golds tall enough to thread the sun, and purples dark as the night sky over forgotten moors. Carpets lie thick and sumptuous beneath the feet, threaded with esoteric patterns that might reveal mysterious truths—or at the very least, with enough complexity to confuse unwelcome visitors senseless. Lanterns, hung like terrestrial constellations, swing gently, their flames casting flickering shadows that seem to dance with the bones and relics enshrined within shadowy alcoves.

Here lie holy relics aplenty: not only the expected fragments of saints but an anonymous sheep’s bone, carried and venerated with a sincerity only rivalled by the pomp surrounding it. Such curiosities fill niches

and cupboards, each whispered about in hushed tones by the custodians who guard them with a mixture of reverence and weary amusement.

And so the cathedral breathes—an eternal monument of contradictions: majestic yet crumbling, sacred yet absurdly lavish, alive with the echo of footsteps long gone, and gleaming with the blush of treasures amassed by generations that have long since become dust.

1767: The Tale of Nancy the Wood Nymph; or, The Tree that Remembered

The antiquity of this fable is doubtful; the nymph's name, Nancy, seems an improbable relic of pre-Christian lore. Yet the Dowagers have always insisted upon its authenticity, which obliges the present editor to include it. [Ed]

Once upon a very ancient time—so ancient that even the stars had not quite learned obedience and sometimes wandered from their places—there was a forest vast beyond the measure of mortal eyes. It stretched for furlongs upon furlongs; to the eastern mountains that caught the first sunlight like polished shields, to the rivers of the western valleys that murmured secrets to themselves, to the northern plains where wild horses roamed as free as thoughts, and southward unto the sea which lapped at its roots and whispered of faraway realms.

In this forest the trees stood like kings and queens of an elder court. Their crowns were older than empires; their roots, deeper than gods. When storms came, the forest did not tremble but merely lifted its great shoulders to meet the rain. Between those pillars of living wood, in the green cathedrals of leaf and shadow, life abounded: birds of colour unknown to human heraldry, serpents with eyes like beads of dew, lizards that sang in the heat, and shy beasts that crept forth only when night poured silver upon the ferns.

And amid all this splendour lived Nancy, a Wood Nymph—daughter of the Dryads, cousin to the laughing Naiads who flung themselves down waterfalls, and sister to the swift Oreads who chased deer through the hills. Her home was no cottage but a great tree whose roots clasped the earth like a mother her child. Its branches curved to form halls and stairways of living timber where birds nested as guests and foxes slept beneath as tenants. When Nancy sang, the leaves above would part at her request, and sunlight would fall like golden honey upon the young saplings below.

She busied herself in tending to her domain with such devotion that even the oldest trees bowed faintly when she passed, which among trees is no small compliment. If a blossom failed to open, she breathed upon

it; if a brook ran slow, she whispered to the Naiads until laughter set it racing again. Never did she harm a living thing, for the wood nymphs are the gentlest children of creation—until sorrow teaches them defiance.

Now it was upon a bright morning—one of those mornings that seem newly invented by heaven—that Nancy heard a sound never before known in her forest: a clash like a thunderbolt trapped in wood, regular and cruel. Thwack! Thwack! Thwack! The noise startled the robins, frightened the hares, and echoed through the trunks until even the slumbering trees stirred uneasily.

Following the sound, Nancy came to the edge of her groves and saw a man wielding an axe of iron. It glittered like unnatural frost. He was strong and sullen, clothed in coarse wool, his eyes fixed upon her own tree, her very heart.

“Good sir,” said Nancy, stepping lightly upon a fallen log. Her voice was kind and bright, for nymphs know no other at first. “You stand before a dwelling, not dead timber. The roots beneath your feet are the bones of my home; the leaves above you are my dreaming brow.”

The man wiped his mouth and looked about. “Where are you hid, little witch?” he asked hoarsely. “My wife sends me for wood, and wood I’ll have, for our hearth groweth cold.”

“Then take the fallen branches, friend. The forest is generous, never grudging to those who ask with open palms.”

He stared at her, yet not as men look upon reason but as they look upon temptation. It is the peculiar curse of humankind that they recognise wonder only to fear it. “I’ll take the heart of the tree,” said he. “It has stood long enough, and I have debts to pay.”

He swung his axe. The blade bit deep into bark, into sap, into flesh. For a moment the whole forest seemed to cry out—the birds, the wind, even the river paused as if grieving. The second stroke fell and Nancy pressed her hand against the trunk; the third, and she gasped, for the blow had entered both wood and spirit.

She might have fled into the air, as nymphs sometimes do when danger comes. Yet she remained, whether by courage or bewildered love for her ancient tree. When the fourth stroke fell, she smiled faintly. “I did not choose this sacrifice,” she murmured, “but perhaps I would have, had the forest asked”. Then, as the man raised his axe once more, she vanished into the timber, and the tree fell with a cry that echoed to the mountains.

When silence returned, the woodsman found no trace of her—only a pale light seeping from the sap and a fragrance like spring rain after long grief. He turned homeward laden with the logs that had once been her dwelling. That night his hearth burned higher than ever before, but his

sleep was not easy. He dreamed of vines creeping through his window, of branches sprouting from his arms, of roots coiling round his feet. Each dawn he awoke weaker, more wooden, until by the seventh night his wife found him standing rigid beside the fire, his hair turned to moss, his skin dark as bark. The logs had fallen cold. The forest had come to claim its own.

As for Nancy, the villagers say she is dead. Her tree lies mossed over, her laughter gone. Yet those who walk the forest at twilight tell other tales. They say that her saplings have grown taller than the tallest pine, and that when sunlight filters down through the leaves, it forms a figure dancing in the gold dust—no more than a glimmer, but full of life. The birds still sing above it; the small creatures venture out to play once more; and sometimes, when the wind is kind, a soft woman's voice can be heard whispering:

“Take only what you must; for even trees remember.”

Thus ends the story of Nancy the Wood Nymph, who perished, and did not perish—for though her tree was felled, her spirit grew anew in every sapling's reach toward heaven. The forest, being older than empires and deeper than gods, cared for her as mothers care for children who never quite come home.

1795: The great Arboris

In the depths of a universe stitched together by whispers of root and branch, there stood the great Arboris—a tree as old as time's first sigh, a sentinel of realms in mystery and might. Arboris stretched its limbs beyond mortal comprehension, its roots tangled in the fabric of infinite worlds, holding the interlocking multiverses in a delicate, verdant balance.

From Arboris there sprouted a single seed, curious and bright as a star freshly plucked from night's cloak. This seed, once cast upon the cosmic wind, grew into a sapling of such otherworldly grace and strength that it soon transcended its arboreal nature. The sapling's trunk slowly transformed, taking the shape of a wooden chest—solid, enigmatic, and brimming with untold secrets. This chest, both guardian and repository, contained a library of living knowledge, its shelves bending under the weight of countless stories, each whispering the lore of infinite worlds.

Yet the marvel does not cease there. The library found its shelter within a stately house, a sanctuary for thought and dream, filled with shadowed corners and sunlit nooks, a place where the ebb and flow of time seemed to kiss each dust mote with a kind of sacred grace. And here, in a final flourish of mystical recursion, the house itself was

cradled inside the very trunk of that chest—the wooden guardian of knowledge—which in turn rested within the seed still clinging to the grand trunk of Arboris itself.

Thus, the seed that is the tree holds the chest that holds the library that holds the house that is itself contained within the seed, all revolving in an eternal dance upon the mighty trunk of Arboris—the living spine of multiverses intertwined.

Within this endless nesting lies the truth of beginnings and endings entwined, a cosmic story ceaselessly unfolding as every grain of wood, every whisper of page, and every breath within that house echo the heartbeat of all worlds bound by the roots of Arboris, the tree that is also everything it holds.

This tale, woven of wood and wonder, is a song of infinite recursion and unyielding mystery—a legacy of life that is both seed and tree, chest and house, self and universe.

1799: The Swan-Brothers and the Fairy Tart

Once upon a time, in an age when the moon hung lower over the pines and the breeze itself seemed bewitched, there dwelt a certain fairy amidst twelve noble swans of surpassing beauty. By day they glided upon the silver lake as creatures of grace beyond mortal naming; by night they became men again—if men they ever were—bright-eyed, nimble-limbed, with stockings drawn to bursting and laughter like the ringing of goblets. Their revels resounded through the evergreen hollows, for they danced until dawn and supped upon the dews and fruits of the forest, finding in every blossom's heart a drop of sweet intoxication.

Now, though tale and token named them brothers, the truth was of a less pious complexion. They were brothers rather in vanity and velvet, comrades in every tender vice, bound by a fellowship of mirth and mischief. Their hearts beat not to hymns but to the music of each other's sighs. It was whispered among the dryads that if one crept near their moonlit ring, one might spy kisses stolen under the boughs and gestures that even Pan himself would bless with a knowing grin.

As for the fairy, she—though oft styled a maiden—possessed more masks than any mortal count might dare wear in Lent. Some nights she came robed in pearls and powder, her smile sharper than a duke's dagger and her voice trilling as if cupid had taught it. Other nights he flung aside the silks, donned the guise of a gallant rake, and took the lead in their wildest measures. In truth, this creature was of neither simple sex nor steady shape; now he, now she, now something soaring

beyond both. Yet all knew them as the Tart of the Wood—a name uttered half in jest, half in adoration.

So they lived and dallied, whispering in the antique tongues beloved of poets long dead—“thou” and “thee”, “sweetest heart” and “fairest sin”—their speech as florid as their affections. They plotted, too, to enlarge their merry band—though none ever asked how such new swans would be found, or by whose hand they would be transformed—to charm new swans from distant lakes, to adorn the night with ever fairer forms. And though jealousy flamed among them like wine on the lips, it burned no truer than love itself. For even in their quarrels there gleamed that generous madness which springs only from shared delight.

And the fairy, by whatever semblance worn, was content. For in that fellowship of feathers and foolery, of passion unbridled by priest or prince, the Tart found a strange peace—part laughter, part longing, wholly alive beneath the ancient moon.



In the Days Before Days, when the stars still waited in line for their light and the Nile hadn't quite decided which direction to go, there dwelt in the waters a peculiar and rather opinionated creature called the Hydrus. It resembled a mallard duck in the same way that a thunderstorm resembles polite conversation—tenuously, and mostly by accident. The Hydrus was feathered, to be sure, but its feathers shimmered with an unearthly hue like wet sunlight seen through honey. Its eyes glowed with the kind of intelligence that often gets creatures into very deep metaphysical trouble.

The Hydrus lived amidst reeds that whispered secrets, frogs that quoted scripture, and crocodiles that believed firmly in the right of fang and jaw. And the Hydrus, well, it despised them. The reasons for this ancient loathing were lost to history (and several very lazy monks), but it was whispered that the crocodiles had once mocked the Hydrus for swimming upright, or stealing fish, or daring to sing hymns at dawn. Whatever the cause, the Hydrus devoted its unending life to the highly specific pastime of crocodile assassination.

Now, the Hydrus was a devout duck, which is to say entirely mad but transcendently sincere. Every few cycles of the Nile, it enacted a ritual so bizarre that even the moon refused to watch. First, it rolled itself in sacred mud—the sticky, holy stuff that smeared sins, secrets, and small insects alike—until it gleamed slick as oiled glass. Then it pattered quietly along the riverbank in search of its victim.

When it found one—a swollen, dreaming crocodile basking in the heat of creation—the Hydrus smiled, a small, duck-sized smile drenched in divine purpose. The crocodile’s mouth gaped open, as crocodile mouths are wont to do, full of wicked teeth arranged like a small and enthusiastic chapel choir. And into this mouth the Hydrus dove, beak first, singing a wordless hymn that only mud and angels know.

Now comes the bit that even the priests of Memphis refused to write down without wine. The startled crocodile awoke—too late!—and swallowed the Hydrus whole. Within the dark cathedral of flesh, the Hydrus began its true work. It flared its wings, anointed by mud and mystery, and shattered the beast from within, bursting gloriously out through the crocodile’s side. There was light where there should never have been light, and the corpse of the crocodile sank beneath the river like a fallen kingdom.

The priests said the Hydrus rose from the water afterwards gleaming, not wounded in the least, dripping radiance—a creature that had passed through death and returned not diminished but somehow multiplicative. The river swelled for joy and carried the scent of lilies three days downstream.

It was said that in this act, the Hydrus touched some ancient pattern wound deep into the bones of the world—a riddle of light and darkness repeating itself, though no one could quite agree which was meant to conquer which.

The crocodile was no mere beast, you see, but the old devourer—the nameless darkness that had swallowed the First Ones, a pair of bewildered souls who’d wandered too far from the Garden Where Things Are Always New. The crocodile’s belly was their prison, the underworld wrapped in scales.

The Hydrus entered willingly, not by fate’s corruption but by choice. There, in the viscera of defeat, it found the bound spirits of those earliest wanderers and whispered to them, Come, the water will bear you home. When the Hydrus burst through the walls of the crocodile’s death, the light that spilled out was the same light that lit the stars. The First Ones—those misplaced tenants of creation—rose behind it, blinking, astonished to be alive again.

The wise say the Hydrus was born of the river, but beyond time—sent ahead of its own future, acting in ages before the story of its birth had even been dreamt. For such is the way of holy paradox: sometimes the saviour arrives millennia before his own cradle, slips into death before dying has been invented, and redeems what the world does not yet know it has lost.

And so when the reeds sing in the rising dusk, and the river gleams like a blade blessed by moonlight, they still tell the tale of the Hydrus—who dove into darkness not to die, but to unmake dying itself. And if one watches long enough in the hush before dawn, one might glimpse a splash, small and impossibly golden, as though the Nile were remembering something too beautiful to forget.

QUACK



1810: The Hum at the End of the Lawn

At certain hours, the house seems to hum of its own accord. The sound begins in the kitchen, beneath the copper pans, and carries along the corridor, where it passes between portraits that nobody remembers hanging. No one is certain whether the house hums because it is content or because the air must move through it in order to keep it standing. Some say the hum begins in the smallest rooms, others insist it travels like a faint weather front from the attics downward, like a notion being reconsidered.

A rook lands upon the lawn at four in the afternoon and stands without choosing a direction. The grass appears to lean towards it, as if waiting for the decision. The wind pauses, then repeats itself slightly differently, a courteous mimicry. Those who live within the house find that to stand very still in such weather brings about a sense of agreement: something wishes one well, or at least notices that one is doing one's part.

Each morning the servants open the shutters in a strict order, as though releasing light were a ceremony demanding symmetry. The first light falls upon the long dining table; its surface acknowledges nothing and reflects everything with perfect formality. There is a rule, unspoken but widely observed, that one must never polish it twice in the same direction. The grain resists repetition. The house approves of variation that does not disturb arrangement.

For the flock—if one may use so collective a word—consists of all who move within hearing of the hum: master, guest, maid, garden boy, clockmaker, swallow, mirror, and clock. In this dressing of entities the distinctions stand delicately but definitively, one depending upon the calm endurance of the others. The hum connects them, and yet none would wish to call it connection aloud.

It is said that once a visitor asked why the clocks in every room showed a slightly different minute. The butler replied, "Because time is polite. It will not insist upon being identical where duties differ." The remark passed into proverb, though no one knows who remembered it.

In the afternoons, they take tea precisely when the sky whitens behind the sycamores. Someone always comments upon the weather. It is not the same someone each day, but the same remark returns: "Perhaps it will clear." Upon these four words the company depends utterly. It is the phrase that rights the furniture of thought, the mild domestic hinge upon which the rest turns unnoticed. For who can resist aligning one's sense of self to the small communal rhythm of "Perhaps it will clear"?

This, too, is how the flock maintains itself. Among beasts of the field, among citizens of the parishes of air and earth, there must be continual adjustment: the hum running under hoofbeat and wing. Each creature, not knowing itself entirely, senses its outline echoed by the others. The cat hears its own step twice—once in the ear, once in the floor. The ruler glances at the servant and recognises posture before conscience tells it so. The house knows when it is clean because the servants hum the tune that began in the beams.

Yet one must never force such recognition. The etiquette of equilibrium allows only gentle mirroring. To anticipate praise or reprimand is to disturb the alignment of the flock, so that even the hum falters, coughing once in the pipes. Then all go still, as if caught with wings unbrushed or boots unlaced.

All order aspires to stillness, though stillness never truly arrives. After the silver has been set down, it vibrates faintly, yearning to return to silence. After voices subside, the last syllable insists upon memory. There is management in every pause; there is hierarchy even in quiet. The hum is not peace. It is obedience continuing its argument with itself.

And yet—no one recalls who first noticed—it is only when the hum becomes audible that the house appears truly alive. The line divides understanding from disturbance by the width of a heartbeat. Perhaps the hum is the thinking of walls, the strain of remembering what their occupants prefer to forget. Perhaps it is the house dreaming how others perceive it.

"Perhaps it will clear." The phrase is uttered again next day. The boots of the gardener sound in twin rhythm with the ticking clocks. Someone glances instinctively towards another for confirmation of how the morning feels. It is understood that the feeling shall be agreed upon, even if it must be agreed differently in each heart.

Later, a rook lands where the first rook had landed, some days before. It crouches lower, as if remembering the posture of the earlier bird. The air bends again; the wind performs the echo. A hum persists, though no one notes whether it began before or after the repetition.

By evening, the house has folded back upon itself. The shutters close in reverse order; the servants extinguish lights from topmost chamber to lowest hall. The tables and mirrors receive the darkness with a composure learned from long companionship. The hum lessens, or else one ceases to notice it. Breath by breath, all presume the silence to be mutual.

In that hush each person feels, just faintly, that someone or something nearby knows them more exactly than they could name themselves. And the sensation, rather than frightening, brings a serene fatigue—the comfort of being interpreted by the hum, by the flock, by the slow prediction of the house.

“Perhaps it will clear.”

But it seldom does.

1812

At the edge of a bleak and whispering county, there stood a house none dared quite name aloud after dusk—not because it was cursed, but because it was polite to lower one’s voice when speaking of things that reminded one of emptiness. The seat was known as High Sycamore, though no sycamores grew there now; the air had grown too fine, too fretful for honest timber. Upon a rise it stood, surrounded by parkland slow to green and quick to brown, its avenues neglected into long sighing corridors of grass.

But within that mansion—gloomed, shuttered, and patient as the skeleton of a titanic bird—there was one chamber alive still with colour, perfume, and the unresolved echo of distant delight.

The Ballroom occupied the central breadth of the southern wing: a space so extravagant, so feverishly adorned, that it gave the impression of having been built under enchantment—not built, but dreamed into being. Its ceiling rose like an organ swell, painted in the manner of the Continent, where angels leaned on clouds tinted apricot, and cupids hovered as though unsure whether to laugh or flee. Panels of mirrored glass, French and Venetian both, commanded every wall, so that whoever entered was greeted not by their reflection but by a dizzying parliament of themselves.

From the cornices hung chandeliers wrought of Venetian crystal, molten-clear and spun to such delicacy that a breath might make them tremble. Each droplet was cut as a teardrop, faceted to catch the day’s light at a thousand uneasy angles. It was whispered—by the old steward chiefly, who had counted their chains each year for fifty years—that among the crystal ornaments there were those not crystal at all but diamonds and emeralds cleverly worked into the design, because the

Duke, in one of his impossible moods, had declared that true light should be fed with treasure.

The flooring, oak and beech joined in intricate parquet, gleamed with a waxen depth that made it seem a varnished pond. White columns rose like candles from its edges, their capitals unfurled with gilt acanthus leaves. Windows of immense proportion stretched to the moulding above them, admitting such cones of sunlight that one might imagine the house were built solely to cradle beams of gold.

At the far end of the hall stood a tree—impossibly alive, its roots cradled in marble troughs, its branches sown with paper blossoms renewed each year by the hand of some invisible florist. Beneath it was placed a shallow fountain no larger than a footprint, its trickle as refined as a whisper rehearsing its grief.

The Ballroom had its own servants, though none could recall it being used. Their livery was of peacock green, embroidered with silver lilies; they were trained to dust the mirrors with silk feathers, to polish the chandeliers from ladders that reached heaven, and to tune the orchestra's instruments once each season, "lest the Duke call suddenly for music."

They spoke in quiet tones of their inherited ritual: the flautist's chair to be turned precisely three degrees to the left, the double bass inclined toward the east, and each fiddle polished with drops of rose oil on Good Friday. The orchestra—violins, flutes, a harp, and a scandalously large drum—slept beneath dust-cloths embroidered with the ducal crest: a gryphon regarded by the crescent moon.

Around the mirrored walls stood divans of Persian silk, pale as summer clouds; chairs of crushed velvet, whose carved arms coiled into gilded serpents; and alcoves curtained in gauze the shade of apricot flesh. These were the arbors of dalliance, conceived for laughter that had long since died away.

Every spring, the housekeeper ordered roses, stephanotis, and lilies, arranged in vases of Bohemian glass that could shame a sunrise. Their scent argued with the chill of disuse—a strange friction, like perfume lingering on the veil of a widow.

All this splendour existed for one man—the Duke of Mallard, whose habits were as rare as his estates were vast. In his youth he had danced here in a fever of brilliance: his step precise, his smile too sharp for pleasure. Then came a season none now named; afterward, his taste for revelry sank into solitude, and the mirrors became his only audience.

Yet to this day, the servants keep the Ballroom waiting. The lamps are trimmed, their oil fresh. The crystal pendants re-threaded where damp has loosed them. The harps are tuned, the clocks wound. Silk

curtains breathe faintly in the draught from a window kept open—just enough to let the light in, should he return.

Once a year, at the cusp of autumn, the household gathers in silence by the double doors. The housekeeper—a stately matron with hands folded in reverence—orders them to light the chandeliers. The room kindles into a wavering heaven of gold and emerald and flame. Each mirror shows not the assembled servants, but the mirage of couples turning, gowns flaring, applause caught in perpetual rebirth.

The orchestra's shadows seem to lift their bows, though no string hums. The air trembles with a sweetness almost remembered. And in that trembling, the Duke might stroll in—might stand beneath the painted angels, pale as their wings—might dance, if he still possessed weight enough to press the floor.

No one would remark upon it, even if they saw him. For the Ballroom was built not for bodies but for the idea of movement, and so it continues—ageless, immaculate, awaiting the moment the Duke cares once more to dance.

1812: The Lady of the Ever-Shrinking Doors

When Napoleon's shadow stretched long across the Channel and the ton of London danced to divert itself from dread, there lived a lady of such transcendent beauty that she seemed spun from moonlight and myrrh. Her name was Elowen Vesper, and her face—ah, her face!—was a symphony of alabaster skin, eyes like violet twilight, and hair that cascaded in raven waves, catching the candlelight as if woven from the very threads of night. Gentlemen duelled for a glance; ladies wept into their reticules for want of her serenity; even the servants paused in their scrubbing to sigh. Crowds followed her through the gaslit streets of Mayfair, pressing posies and poems upon her carriage steps. At Almack's, she was the voucher no patroness dared deny; at Vauxhall, fireworks burst in homage to her smile.

But beauty, like a surfeit of sweetmeats, palls. Elowen, once a girl of unremarkable prettiness from a crumbling Cornish manor—daughter of a parson who quoted Shelley over smuggled brandy—grew weary of the throng. "They devour me with their eyes", she confided to her mirror one fog-choked dawn, tracing the lines that adoration had etched faintly at her eyes' corners. "I am no longer myself, but a portrait they paint anew each morn". Fed up with the ceaseless adoration, she retreated to her grand house on Grosvenor Square, a labyrinth of gilt and gloom inherited from a seafaring uncle who had vanished in the Spice Islands.

She locked the front doors, bolted the shutters, and retreated to her withdrawing room, a chamber vast as a ballroom, hung with crimson damask and lit by a crystal chandelier that wept prisms like penitential tears. "Here I shall be alone", she declared, sinking into a chaise of peacock velvet. But no sooner had the clock tolled noon than the knocking began—soft at first, like lovers' sighs, then insistent as creditors' fists. Admirers, poets, even the Prince Regent's envoy, rapped upon the panels: "Lady Vesper! A sonnet! A dance! A glimpse!" Servants bore trays of offerings—loquets, sonatas, locks of hair dyed to match her own.

Distraught, Elowen fled deeper into the house, which seemed to unfold like a dream of diminishing realms. The next chamber was smaller: a salon of sapphire silk, unlockable only by a silver key hidden in a clock's pendulum. She turned it with trembling fingers, and the door sealed with a sigh, as if the wood itself conspired. Peace reigned for an hour, broken only by the patter of rain. But twilight brought the siege anew—knocks echoing like spectral fingers, voices murmuring through the keyhole: "Dearest Elowen, unveil thyself! Thy beauty starves the world!" The crowds had multiplied, drawn by rumour as moths to flame; they camped upon her steps, chanting odes beneath her windows.

On she pressed, into a dressing room no larger than a closet, its walls papered in silver leaf that shifted like quicksilver in the gloom. The door had no lock, but a latch of carved ivory—a maiden fleeing a dragon, frozen mid-leap. Elowen slid it home, barricading herself with a fallen screen of ebony and mother-of-pearl. Here, amid phials of attar and corsets unlaced, she tasted solitude: the tick of a hidden clock, the whisper of silk against stone. Yet midnight tolled, and the knocks resumed—louder, laced with desperation. "Elowen! Thy loveliness is our light! Emerge, or we perish in darkness!" The house groaned as if burdened by their longing; shadows lengthened into claws upon the walls.

Dawn found her slipping through a concealed panel into a boudoir scarce bigger than a coffin, panelled in ebony inlaid with moonstone, unlockable by a key of bone that burned cold in her palm. "This must suffice", she gasped, turning the wards. The air grew thick with the scent of wilted roses—offerings pushed through chinks by relentless suitors. She curled upon a daybed of black velvet, dreaming of her youth: a girl of sixteen, plain as porridge, racing barefoot through Cornish gorse, her laughter free as gulls, unobserved save by the wind. No crowds then; no cages of admiration.

But the persistence was infernal. The knocks evolved into thunder—fists, boots, battering rams improvised from park benches. "Beauty!

Show thyself! We adore thee unto death!” Cracks spidered the door; dust sifted from the cornice like grave-mould. Elowen rose, wild-eyed, and fled onward, through a mouse-hole disguised as wainscot, into the smallest room of all—a cell no wider than an arm’s span, hewn from obsidian stone that drank the light. Its door, a slab of heart-oak veined with silver, locked with a key of frozen mercury that wept droplets like tears. She turned it, and the tumblers ground like millstones, sealing her in utter night.

In the chamber’s heart stood a pedestal of porphyry, bearing the arcane trio: a silver bell etched with runes of summoning, a vellum book bound in dragon-scale, its pages whispering forbidden incantations, and a black taper crowned with eternal flame, guttering shadows into sigils of release. Beside them loomed a trunk of ancient yew, bound in iron sigils that pulsed like veins, its lid ajar as if breathing. Elowen knew their significance—relics from her uncle’s voyages, tools of the old magic: bell to call spirits, book to bind them, candle to banish or birth. With these, she might summon a tempest to drown her pursuers, or weave a glamour to render herself invisible as air. “Power”, murmured the book unbidden, its leaves rustling, “to unmake thy curse”.

But Elowen, heartsick and harried, ignored the triad. Magic was for sorceresses and schemers; she craved only oblivion. The trunk beckoned, its interior a vortex of swirling mist, scented with sea-salt and heather—the breath of her lost youth. “Into thee”, she whispered, climbing over the lip without a backward glance. The lid clapped shut like a lover’s final kiss; the room spun into vertigo.

She awoke not in darkness, but in dawn’s tentative gold, sprawled upon dew-kissed gorse in a Cornish meadow. The year was 1790; she was sixteen again—plain-faced, freckled, her hair a tousled mop of chestnut, her gown a homespun shift muddied at the hem. No crowds shadowed her path; no knocks haunted her doors. The parsonage smoked lazily yonder, her father’s voice droning Latin to empty pews. Gulls wheeled overhead, free and fierce; the wind tugged her skirts without adoration.

Elowen rose, laughing—a sound wild as the waves crashing below. She raced to the cliff-edge, arms outstretched, beauty shed like a too-tight corset. Far off, in the world she had fled, rumours swirled: the lady vanished into her mansion, swallowed by the shrinking rooms; the trunk in the final cell now empty, bell silent, book shut, candle snuffed. Admirers dispersed, weeping; the house crumbled into ivy-choked ruin, its doors forever locked upon enigma.

And in Cornwall, the plain girl lived unremarked, her heart vast as the sea, her days her own. For sometimes, to escape the cage of beauty,

one must climb into the trunk of time itself—and emerge, at last, truly seen.

1820: In the Wood of Hatherduck

This afternoon, beneath the chestnut canopy of Hatherduck Wood, I beheld a sight so curious, so sublimely improper, that even now my pen trembles to describe it. The air was gold-green, as if the sun itself had dissolved into the leaves and gone rather giddy with mirth. My companions—those merry scoundrels of the Ancient Order of St Felix—had summoned me to an “outing of fellowship”, which, being young and impressionable, I took for a theological picnic. Imagine then my astonishment when, instead of psalms and cucumber sandwiches, I found forty grown men in velvet doublets prancing like fauns under a banner declaring: “Felix est qui felix hoc sentit!” (Happiness belongs to the happy, or words to that effect.)

Their leader, the Most Radiant Brother, wore a coronet of ivy and bore a wand tipped with peacock feathers. He looked absurdly splendid, like a royal nursery ornament come to life. At his command, flutes and tambourines commenced, and the Brothers of St Felix began to dance about the glade, their cloaks flashing damask and silver. The motion was graceful, and yet—dare I say it?—charged with an electricity most unecclesiastical. One felt they might at any moment dissolve into glitter and laughter, or worse, some terrible truth about joy.

Each of us bore the medallion of our Order: a little duck, poised mid-flight, engraved with the motto “Rideamus!” (Let us laugh). We wore them secretly beneath our shirts—oh, that little warmth against the chest!—and pledged, by moonlight and mead, to the happiness of all men who choose to be happy and mayhap a little peculiar. “Felix is our patron,” said Brother Ithurial, his eyes misted. “He bids men love one another, not sternly, but sweetly; not as judges, but as sprites”. A noble sentiment, if expressed in somewhat rustic Latin.

Later there was a play—six of the Brothers appeared costumed as swans, with white feathers through their hair, and performed a ballet recounting the story of enchantment and deliverance. The moon rose behind them like a saucer of milk. I recall thinking then that perhaps our little fellowship was likewise enchanted, changed from knights and scholars into laughing birds of some flash-lit dream.

At midnight the Great Gong of Felicity was rung (a frying-pan, truth be told), and all fell silent. The Most Radiant Brother spoke: “Brethren, though the world is cold and Roman, yet in the fold of these woods we shall be as the fairies are—gleaming, merry, unseen. St Felix smile upon

you all”. And I confess, quite without shame, that I felt tears creep into my eyes. The notion of happiness as a sacred work—of laughter as prayer—struck me then as most poetic, and I vowed to discharge my knightly duties with renewed vigour and, whenever possible, bare feet.

When dawn rose, we bid the spirits farewell and dissolved into the mist. My boots, muddy with moonlight, stand now by the hearth, and I—oh foolhardy diarist—cannot decide whether the night was dream or revelation. But I think of St Felix still, patron of all happy men, whose blessings are bestowed not from pulpits but from leafy bowers, and whose saints go whistling home through the dew.

The Man Who Doubted Himself Into Being (and Then Out Again)

There once lived, in a village particularly fond of circular arguments, a man named August Duckworth, who did not—in any meaningful sense—believe in himself. He was, by all external appearances, perfectly ordinary: he took tea at precise intervals, paid his taxes when sufficiently reminded, and had achieved in life the kind of anonymity usually reserved for punctuation.

Yet in the dim corners of his mind, which he frequently dusted in search of neglected thoughts, there bloomed a certainty that he was possibly a misunderstanding.

His best friend, Philon Togg, was a philosopher of some self-appointed repute. Philon was known to lecture to anyone who hadn't yet discovered an exit, and was especially famous for once debating the existence of existence with himself—a match that ended in a scoreless draw.

One evening, August confided his unease. “I'm beginning to suspect,” he said, over lukewarm tea, “that I might not actually exist.”

Philon, delighted to find a live audience at last, smiled sagely. “Nonsense. You think, therefore you are.”

“This is meant to be reassuring?” said August.

“It's classical reasoning,” said Philon, puffing himself up. “We think; that proves our existence. No thinking, no you. Simple.”

“Hmm,” said August, chewing the idea thoughtfully. “What if I only seem to think because you expect me to? What if I'm just a projection of your thought about my thinking?”

“I—er—that's preposterous,” said Philon, who immediately felt a dreadful swerve in his logic.

“You see,” said August, “if my existence relies on me thinking, and I'm not entirely sure that I think, then it's perfectly possible that I don't

exist at all. Or worse, that I do exist but am merely mistaken about it. Which would be just my luck.”

“Look,” said Philon, who preferred certainty. “All philosophy begins with doubt.”

“Yes, but how much of it can you survive?” said August.

Unable to leave the matter there—and still less able to leave it alone—August decided to test things scientifically, which in his village meant stacking observations until they fell over.

1 He pinched himself in the morning. Pain, he reasoned, was impressive evidence of existence. Unfortunately, it only demonstrated that something had been pinched. It might, he feared, have been someone else’s hand operating under mutual delusion.

2 He wrote himself a letter addressed “To Whom It May Concern”. When the missive arrived three days later, he was both heartened and troubled. It proved efficiency in the postal service but not the continued existence of either sender or recipient.

3 He stared into a pond for several hours. His reflection blinked when he did, which was encouraging, until he considered that perhaps the pond was simply very polite.

Soon the entire village took an interest. Philosophers argued. Farmers offered opinions. Even the Mayor, who was empirically nonexistent between elections, held an emergency meeting to determine whether they were ethically obliged to believe in August if he no longer believed in himself.

During the discussion, August tried to vanish discreetly but kept bumping into furniture, which was seen as conclusive proof either of existence or poor spatial awareness.

Then one day, quite suddenly, August had a thought. And being an experienced doubter, he immediately grew suspicious of it.

“If I think therefore I am,” he mused, “what happens if I stop thinking about thinking?”

It was a dangerous moment. His mind, confronted with paradox, folded itself like badly written origami. For a fleeting instant, he was deliciously absent. The room grew brighter for having one fewer consciousness in it. Then, with a faint pop—like the sound of uncertain metaphysics reaching critical mass—he reappeared, much to everyone’s relief, particularly his own.

News of this incident reached the Department of Ontological Affairs, a celestial bureaucracy responsible for overseeing the continuation of entities with problematic definitions. A junior angelic clerk was dispatched to review the case.

He found August pacing, muttering, and occasionally checking his pulse by speculative inquiry.

“How do you know you exist?” asked the clerk.

“I think I do.”

“Splendid! Case closed.”

“Unless,” said August, “my thinking is hypothetical.”

The clerk sighed. “Sir, do you have any idea the paperwork you generate when you question your own ontology? The forms for conditional being alone could throttle a concept.”

“I don’t mean to be troublesome,” said August, “but what if believing is necessary to sustain thought?”

“I assure you,” said the clerk, “it’s the other way around.”

“Ah!” cried August triumphantly. “So if I don’t believe in myself, then...”

There was a faint fizz in the air, a smell of imploding logic, and for one brief, elegant moment, August existed only as a philosophical footnote—the metaphysical equivalent of someone stepping out for milk and never returning.

The clerk filled out Form 7B (“Entity Temporarily Absent Due to Paradox”) and left it on the mantelpiece, in case August came back.

Weeks later, letters began arriving addressed to “The Late Mr. Duckworth (by Doubt, out of Existence)”. Philon, who missed having anyone sensible to argue with, wrote a treatise in his friend’s honour titled *Cogito Ergo Summatime*, in which he posited that thoughts were seasonal and selfhood, therefore, a form of weather.

It was not widely read, largely because the moment readers began understanding it, they stopped existing briefly from sheer logical sympathy.

Occasionally, on misty mornings, villagers reported feeling someone beside them muttering faintly, “I doubt, therefore... hmm”. The mist always clears, and the feeling passes.

Philon insists his friend is content somewhere beyond reason, happily unprovable, existing in a state of perpetual maybe.

And so, the moral is perhaps this:

Never doubt yourself to pieces. The paperwork is ruinous, and the reassembly instructions impossible to follow.

1820: The Mirror, the Window and the Uncooperative Trunk

There once stood, in a house that had ideas much above its station, a library whose chief purpose was to remind those inside it that they were not nearly as clever as the books implied. The shelves climbed the

walls like vines, heavy with tomes bound in the sorts of leathers once worn proudly by cows with philosophical tendencies. It was a room designed for thought, silence, and the occasional nervous biscuit.

In the farthest corner, however, lurked a Looking-Glass. It stood at an angle only achievable through centuries of being adjusted and ignored, and its bevelled edge—carved with vines, cherubs, and something that might have been a tax receipt—glimmered faintly, though dust had long given up trying to conquer it. The Mirror considered itself self-reflective in every possible sense, and not always comfortably so.

Opposite the Mirror, beneath a large, many-paned window, squatted a trunk. Not a polite little valise—the kind that carries summer linens and secrets—but a great cubic beast of a thing, roughly three feet by three feet by three feet, made of oak, iron, brass, and the weary patience of its hinges. It was a trunk designed by an optimist and maintained by a pessimist: a piece of furniture that looked as if it regretted knowing what it contained.

When the sun moved westward, light would slant through the window, mulched by leaves from the ancient plane tree outside. It broke into beams and shadows of prismatic brilliance—not neat little rainbows, but long, indecisive geometries that refracted across the Mirror with all the grace of spilled paint deciding to feel spiritual.

This daily arrangement created an optical conundrum. The Mirror reflected the window, which reflected the light, which illuminated the trunk, which glowed, which was then reflected back into the Mirror—until the entire enterprise resembled a self-employed aurora borealis working overtime. And within that shimmering feedback loop, observers swore they saw movement. The Trunk, in mirrored miniature, was seen to twitch—perhaps sigh—its shadow shifting as though rearranging itself to a more comfortable mood.

As is the way of all improbable phenomena, word got out. Philosophers arrived by the carriage-load, which strained the local infrastructure and the patience of everyone involved. They camped in the library, taking notes in duelling systems of handwriting and disagreeing about whether the Mirror was enchanted, the Trunk bewitched, or the sunlight simply unionising in protest against Euclid.

One philosopher, a certain Dr. Corin Undershelf, attempted to trap the movement by documenting every glint and shimmer. Weeks later, he concluded that the mirror and the trunk formed a closed metaphysical loop, each reflecting the probability of the other's existence. When presented with this paper, the local university denied all involvement and quietly turned off its lamps for a month.

The more carnally minded declared that the Trunk must be haunted, perhaps by the ghost of an over-packed vacation. Others postulated that the Mirror contained a portal to somewhere inconvenient—possibly a dimension where unfinished sentences went to brood. A poet who lived on reputation alone described the phenomenon as “sunlight dreaming through glass of what it might become”. No one paid him, but everyone applauded.

The Window, for its part, was older than decorum and rather enjoyed the attention. It had seen centuries of human devotion to pattern and dust. Its individual panes—each irregular, each opinionated—bent the sunlight like bureaucrats reshaping the truth: reluctantly but with impressive results. Through those pale mosaics fell the universe itself, re-arranged into brief brilliance on the Mirror’s surface.

“What nonsense,” the Window would have said, had it been given the dignity of speech. “All this fuss about light. It’s just photons behaving as they please. I merely allow them the stage.”

Yet even the Window could not account for the way the Mirror sometimes shimmered when there was no sunlight, or for the peculiar warmth that rose from the Trunk on nights of a new moon.

No key was ever found for the Trunk, though countless amateurs tried. It bore impressions along its edges—symbols resembling letters trying to remember their alphabet. It smelled faintly of cedar, rainwater, and something sweetly unidentifiable, like memory half-forgotten.

When the light struck it correctly, the Mirror amplified those symbols until they almost resembled faces—or perhaps landscapes, or just smudges of rumour. Once, a maid dusting the Mirror at dawn saw, in the glass, the Trunk’s lid lifting a fraction—enough to show darkness inside that appeared somehow illuminated from below. She left her employment shortly thereafter and took up a quieter position cataloguing shadows.

Centuries later, when the house had fallen to ruin and the library played host only to silence and raccoons with literacy ambitions, the Mirror remained. And it was rumoured, among those who still practiced the dangerous art of listening to reflections, that on certain afternoons the Mirror grumbled faintly about “doing all the work,” while the Trunk “just sits there like existential furniture.”

Nothing, it complained, was harder than being a coherent metaphor trapped between solid oak and light. It reflected upon itself constantly—literally—and wished, once in its long life, that it could turn around and see what was behind it.

No one ever opened the Trunk, or resolved whether the movement was illusion, mechanism, or miracle. The house finally collapsed around

them both, and it is said that even now, under vines and soil, the Mirror still gathers scattered beams from the indifferent sky, igniting small prismatic revolutions in the darkness while the Trunk glows faintly beside it, dreaming contentedly of being misunderstood.

And perhaps that is the point: some objects exist not to be opened, but to prove that mystery can, if properly lit, complain just loudly enough to feel alive.

1820: The Woman Without Continuance

They said she had once lived in the house above the marsh—the long, low dwelling whose windows persisted in showing lights even when the candles were long burnt out. Yet no two mouths could agree upon her countenance. Some swore her hair was pale as winter dawn, others that it was raven-dark; to a few, she was radiant, the idol of lost youth; to others, only a dreadful absence, a distortion in the air where shape should have been.

Her name, when it was spoken at all, altered with each decade. The villagers' children called her Mistriss Veil, for she was glimpsed through vapour; their grandmothers, who recalled things written in the parish records, said she was Evelina Marsh, a daughter of that family who fell to ruin one storm century past. Each account, when compared, proved inconsistent, as if the woman herself had been stitched together from the language of recollection—never from the verities of flesh.

The house stood alone—its timbers warped, its chimneys green with mould and years—and yet it never wholly surrendered to decay. Even the crows that passed above it gave strange cries, like speech interrupted. In the spring of 1820, when the floods rose and reeds stank under the sudden weight of water, a newcomer took lodging at the village inn: a scholar from Edinburgh, one Mr Lucien Trevany, who came armed with notebooks and a small moral lamp to illuminate mysteries suited neither to man nor reason.

“I have heard”, said he to the innkeeper, “that stories dwell here as mists dwell in hollows”.

“They do, sir”, replied the innkeeper gravely, “and one story walks on two feet”.

Within a week, Trevany had gone to the marsh house.

From all accounts, Evelina Marsh had been remarkable chiefly for her vanishment. She had lived, briefly and in modest grace, as the youngest of three; she had written poetry for her own amusement; she had consented almost to marry a neighbour's son; and then, one dusk in November, she had ceased—in just that vague verb—as though translated into air.

Trevany recorded that first night in his journal:

“Saw, toward midnight, a reflection of light on the upper window—the right-hand one. Not a candle-flare nor lantern, but such serene phosphorescence as one sees on the tide when it breaks upon sand. Could hear nothing but the reeds’ whisper, never ending”.

He slept poorly at the inn, beset by dreams of a woman who spoke not in voice but in the echo of letters half-read, whose face rearranged itself with every thought he formed about it.

What sustained her, it seemed, were words. The curate, when pressed by Trevany, said: “She is nothing if we do not describe her; she flickers when silence falls”. And so he and the villagers had made a habit of remembering her aloud—if only to keep the house from sinking. They recalled her laughter, her sorrow, the texture of her gown, the fragrance of her discarded gloves. Their stories contradicted one another violently, but the contradictions bred vitality, as though she drew nourishment not from truth but from the uncertainty of recollection.

Each retelling built another stratum of her, thin as frost over glass. One night, Trevany attempted to write her portrait by combining their testimonies—hair of gold, eyes grey, lips grave, spirit mild. When he lifted his eyes from the page, the curtains quivered and disclosed a figure standing at the windowpane, smiling faintly, as if aware that it was being created.

He burned that first description.

On the second fortnight, the mists thickened till the marsh resembled a sea with no shore. Trevany went out under a faint, red moon and heard a voice: neither echo nor hallucination, but language spoken by the air itself.

“You recall me poorly”, the voice said. “Do you mean me fair or fearful to-night?”

“Who are you?” he asked.

“I am as you speak me”.

He reached for her hand but found only the condensation of breath upon his fingers. Yet for one moment, he thought he saw her face clearly—a visage both perfectly known and entirely unmade, as if it had been his memory rather than his eyes that perceived her.

By midsummer he too had become uncertain. The landlord found his room vacant, the journals left in disorder, as though the ink itself had fled the page. A faint outline of a figure seemed drawn in damp upon the wall where a candle might once have cast its glow. In the marsh house, the upper window burned bright once more, but this time the light shifted shape—first like a woman’s silhouette, then like a spectre stooping to write.

The people kept their habit of speech. When they mentioned Lucien Trevany, they described him as meticulous, melancholy, curious, tragic, or foolish. His age and hair changed with the seasons, his birthplace wandered north and south, and presently his image accompanied hers: she and he bound together, two phantoms sustained by the persistence of commentary, neither alive save in the telling.

By 1830, travellers swore that the marsh house no longer stood there at all. By 1840, the boundary had been ploughed into pasture. And still—when fog rises up from the river and sentences drift uncompleted in conversation—there remains, between word and silence, the faintest impression of a woman passing, fading, reforming, as if language itself refuses to let her rest.

1860: A devil's tail

There was once an angle called Glod-frey. Any dolt will tell you, if you can convince him to speak and not contemplate his navel, that Glod-frey was the brother of Glod.

Glod was the eldest son of a remarkably large family: he had a wife who had left soon after the birth of her seventh son. And Glod himself, ruler of the heavens and sitter on a seat, had brothers and sisters, who led rather dull lives being worshipped by the dolts Glod had also created at the time of Creation.

One spring morning around the time of our Glod, 1102, Glod-frey decided he was bored sitting on the right hand of his brother, who was amused to twiddle his fingers to the greater discomfort of his brother.

So Glod-frey went to a local shop and ordered a basalt coach with cobalt wings, a crystal sceptre, a ball of string and a star-shaped thingummy. Sadly the shop was all out of cobalt so he had to settle for black.

He proclaimed: "I'm going down there to see what mischief I can make: liven them up a bit. Give a bit of good cheer.. See if you can stop me". And "I really don't like black, it makes my eyes seem small and my skin pallid."

He soon discovered how boring the dolts were, heads down, always pulling fluff from their navels and exclaiming it the work of Glod.

Glod-frey encamped in a place he renamed "Hardes", set his dogs loose and settled in for eternity. He employed a boat-man to ferry such foolish dolts as wanted to visit him across the vast moat surrounding his palatial residence; and made them pay the ferry-man with little circles of base metals. All seemed fairly right with the world for the next several hundred years.

Some days, in keeping with some of the mischief-making of his younger sisters—what verve, what panache—he betook himself in a different form. He preferred the hoof-and-horse aspect with horns and tufts of red hair but sometimes he appeared as a cloven hoof resting on a mantle or half an eye sitting in a vase of vinegar.

He had always preferred the bubbie types who seemed to be in less favour than the blokes but in a more plentiful supply. They'd dance and laugh, tell silly jokes and make lerv. He invented boogie-woogie just for fun and everyone—except Glod's people—seemed to love him.

But happy days do not persist for ever and ever. Achew.

Glod, who missed his hand-warmer, employed the public relations arm of heaven to undermine Glod-frey's pleasurable pastimes. They invented sin and rewrote the Babble to include plenty of references to snakes and gurlies doing the wrong thing, like learning stuff. As well, of course, of rather boring dolts doing the "right" thing like turning wine into water, salt pillars and piles of dung made into loaves for similitude.

And that's why we now have the famous phrase intoned by the right kind of dolts: "Whoever makes a practice of sinning is of the devil, for the devil has been sinning from the beginning". Which was rather unfair, as Glod-frey hadn't arrived at the beginning.

1860: The Harp of the Hemlock Yews

In the old country, before the railways came and the forests were cut down for fences and account books, there lived a woman whose name is now forgotten but whose harp songs still haunt the valleys in dreams. There was not among them a woman more beautiful than she. She surpassed in fairness the goddesses and the petals of the privet and the blooming roses and the fragrant lilies of the fields. The glory of spring shone in her alone and she had the splendour of the stars in her two eyes and splendid hair shining with the gleam of gold.

They said she came walking out of the mists one morning when the air smelled of iron and rain, barefoot across the ploughland, carrying the harp close to her heart as though it were a sleeping child. No one saw from whence she came, though many claimed to have heard, on the night before, a wind like the trembling of strings beyond the hills. She stayed in the village on a whim—or so it seemed to men—and took the ruinous cottage by the edge of the wood, where the ground was rich with yew roots and the owls spoke disquieting auguries from the rafters.

By day she gathered weeds and rare blossoms, filling the air with scents that made the air drowsy: hemlock and foxglove, wolfsbane and corncockles, nightshade by night and spurge by day. She knew the

tongues of plants and stones, what leaf could draw out fever and what root might undo grief. Marshmallow to soothe, knitbone to mend, yarrow for tisanes and bezoar stones for all. When quarrels broke out among the men, she would sit upon the low wall and pluck the harp. The first sigh of sound—the hum before the note—would make the strongest loosen their grip on knife or bottle as though weary of their own rage. When plague came, the sick would sleep while she played, and in the morning the fever would be gone, as if it had found her melody a more fitting host.

And yet peace, once bought, grows resented. The priest's wife whispered that her sweetness was the Devil's decoy, and the apothecary, half-ruined by her knowledge of simples, spread the tale that she had learned her craft in a gallows pit. The farmers crossed themselves when she passed, though they still sent for her when their cows went lame.

At harvest, a strange change came over her. She began to wander by moonlight, barefoot and unarmoured, her hair unpinned and trailing like a spill of fire. The harp's notes grew longer, darker, almost human in their sorrow. Children spoke of candlelight gleaming in the wood, where no windows stood, and of whispering voices that came not from men's mouths.

On a night of thunder, she vanished. No door was broken, no trace left but the harp upon her bed, its strings slack as if they too had died. The yews she had planted stood blacker than usual, and the air smelt of wild honey and rain-torn leaves. Villagers claimed, for a time, to hear her music far off in the marsh—tunes that made beasts kneel and wolves forget hunger—but as the years passed, even the echoes thinned.

Now the house is gone, but the yews remain, bent together like mourners. In early spring, when the light is strange and the air uneasy, those who pass that way say they hear a single note trembling through the branches. Some aver it is only the wind. Others, older and more foolish, say the harp was never left at all—that it followed her where men cannot go—and that when the world lies too sick or too cruel, she will play again to still us all.

The World as Representation (and Other Disasters in the Kingdom of Noodrania)

Once upon a time—or possibly several, the records are uncertain—there was a small but thoroughly confused kingdom called Noodrania, tucked between two mountains that never agreed on directions and a sea that occasionally relocated itself on holidays.

In Noodrania one could expect, on any given morning, to wake up as

something else due to bureaucratic error, meteorological whim, or metaphysical interference. Ducks had been known to wake as vicars, vicars as pastries, and pastries as Members of Parliament. No one complained much, as long as taxes were recalculated appropriately.

Now, into this unsteady idyll wandered Sir Artibald Shoopenhawker, a philosopher of uncertain parentage, infinite leisure, and the kind of hair that appeared to have lost an argument with several weather systems at once. Sir Artibald had read a very large number of books—most of them upside-down—and had concluded that what other people called “reality” was probably just him, projected very badly.

He sat one day beside the royal duck pond (which at that moment believed it was a lake) and declared to no one in particular,

“The world, dear waterfowl, exists only as representation in my mind!”

A nearby duck, who had heard enough philosophers to recognise peril, muttered, “Good grief, not again,” and paddled toward shallower metaphors.

But Sir Artibald, seeing no obvious opposition except his reflection—which looked faintly skeptical—pressed on.

“Observe! Objects exist merely as ideas dependent on cognition—mine! The world around me, my fine feathered figment, is but a grand illusion of time, space, and—oh bugger, I’ve dropped my sandwich.”

Word of this revelation spread quickly through Noodrania. The kingdom’s Prime Minister for Inexplicable Affairs, Lady Ermingarde Grint, hastily convened a committee consisting of a spoon, a retired postman, and a smallish cloud that drifted in by mistake. They met in the ancient Chancery to decide whether existence would continue or be suspended for maintenance.

The spoon proposed that if the world existed merely as representation, it ought to charge promotional fees. The postman maintained that, existential or not, people still expected their mail. The cloud abstained on account of weather.

Meanwhile, Sir Artibald, having realised that thinking made things real, resolved to stop immediately in case something unpleasant popped into being. He sat in a dark room, not thinking, very loudly. It was remarkably difficult. His brain, unaccustomed to unemployment, began to hum, whistle, and draft elaborate philosophy all on its own.

He attempted asceticism for five minutes, achieved mild hunger, and at precisely the sixth minute achieved enlightenment—or indigestion; the distinction is philosophical.

[The Royal Physicians later traced the episode to an undigested blueberry tart, but the transfigured philosopher refused to acknowledge causality on moral grounds.]

Just as he was recalculating nonexistence, Dame Aesthetica de Vinn, patroness of pleasant scenery and metaphysical picnic lunches, swooped into town in a carriage that gleamed with impracticality. She was rumoured to have personally invented art appreciation after an unfortunate engagement to geometry.

“Artibald!” she cried. “You look ghastly. Have you renounced everything again?”

“I have,” said he proudly, “abandoned the will to live!”

She clicked her tongue. “How dreadfully unfashionable. Everyone’s having a will this season. Some even have two.”

He explained, with the slow, tragic dignity of one explaining gravity to a teapot, that all life was will—a blind, unconscious, aimless striving beyond time and sense—and that redemption could only come through negating it entirely.

“My dear man,” said Dame Aesthetica, “you’ve just defined Parliament.”

“You mock, but I am free of all desire.”

“You’re sweating at the smell of the cake cart.”

Their discussion rapidly developed into an aesthetic crisis. Dame Aesthetica insisted that art, not renunciation, released souls from suffering. “Beauty elevates us beyond the will!” she declared, striking a pose that made several pigeons rethink religion.

Sir Artibald countered that all music, painting, and candlelight were merely deceptive shadows of the Ideal, but he did concede that candlelight was flattering.

The next day, a deputation of metaphysical entities arrived: the Minister of Representation (shape of a filing cabinet), an Ambassador from Spacetime (round but punctual), and several Things-in-Themselves, who protested violently that they had been misrepresented since Plato.

“If we exist only in your mind,” growled one of them, “do you mind thinking us shorter? Your metaphors are killing my posture.”

They filed an official complaint, and for thirteen minutes the entire kingdom ceased to exist while lawyers compared definitions. When existence resumed, everyone agreed to pretend it hadn’t been awkward.

At last, Sir Artibald declared he would demonstrate supreme renunciation by negating the will entirely on the Palace steps at noon. A crowd assembled, hopeful that this might at least clear traffic.

He stood, robed in sackcloth and faint bewilderment, lifted his hands, and began to unspeak existence. “I hereby quit being!” he announced.

Nothing happened, which was disappointing to everyone except the universe, which sighed with relief.

Someone in the back shouted, “Try unplugging yourself and plugging back in!”

Others suggested snacks, theological debate, or just a nice nap. Dame Aesthetica offered him a sausage roll as proof of earthly delight. He wavered, looked tragically at the heavens, and ate it.

“Delicious,” he admitted. “Perhaps redemption can wait until after tea.”

Noodrania continues to this day (subject to representation). The ducks remain skeptical, the spoon runs Philosophy Evenings every Thursday, and the Prime Minister declares reality “mostly satisfactory, though still waiting on proper funding.”

Sir Artibald Shoopenhawker went on to write *The World as I Ordered It Slightly Less Complicated*, in which he maintained that the world is perhaps a single, blind will... but one that can be bribed with pastries.

And philosophers ever after agreed on one thing only: If the world exists merely as representation, one should at least arrange it with comfortable chairs and cake.

1860: The Tale of the Mirror Twins and the Princess of Kalighat (*A Caution, or Possibly a Celebration*)

Once upon a time, when the hot winds of India blew in from the endless sands and the moon hung heavy as a silver shield above the palms, there lived two English twins, alike as two thoughts before guilt. They were called Peregrine and Aubrey Willoughby, and from their birth none could tell them apart—not even their mother, who died attempting to decide which was handsomer.

In youth they were sent into the East, which was the proper destination for those Englishmen too beautiful or too troublesome to remain at home. They thrived exceedingly, as handsome men sometimes do in warm countries, gaining rank, immunity, and the curious confidence of the native courts.

It was there, among dusty palaces and perfumed intrigue, that they met the Princess of Kalighat—an intelligent young monarch with eyes as black as philosophy. She adored them both, which was convenient,

since they adored being adored far too much to quarrel over her. And so a polite arrangement took place: Peregrine married her formally, while Aubrey remained spiritually indispensable. It shocked Calcutta, delighted the missionaries, and deeply amused the gods, who are notoriously difficult to entertain.

They built a palace of pale pink stone with verandahs vast enough to contain both conscience and laughter, and there they lived—one flesh of three souls, or possibly three fleshes of one soul—until time itself became uncertain which was which.

As months passed, the Princess learned the Willoughby manner. She began to ride astride, employ English profanity, and prefer whisky to sherbet. Her complexion paled; her voice grew ironic. In the same interval, the twins acquired a tendency to gesture with their wrists and wear jewels that clicked in rhythm when they walked. Guests whispered that it was impossible now to say which of the three possessed the original spirit and which were the reflections. The ayahs crossed themselves discreetly and said the moon had mixed their shadows together.

Yet the Princess was mortal, and England was jealous of its wandering sons. Letters came from home urging responsibilities of lineage, estates, and respectability. “Return swiftly”, they read, “and bring the Princess if you must—you may civilise her.” This, understandably, offended everyone equally.

So the twins decided to visit the northern hills, where the air was thin enough to evaporate duty. The Princess joined them, dressed in men’s clothes, laughing that they made the prettiest set of rascals ever to defy geography.

On the second night, beneath a blood-orange moon, they camped by a gorge where the rocks dropped sheer into screaming silence. What passed then no witness other than themselves could tell. But when the morning came, the servants ran shouting that the Princess had fallen.

Peregrine—or Aubrey, depending on which voice gave the orders—stood white and splendid, pointing to the edge. The other twin sat beside the tent, weeping—or laughing—behind his hands. They told a coherent tale: that one twin, distracted while guiding her horse, had stumbled and vanished, and that grief had made the survivor pale and trembling. None questioned it; their resemblance was still so perfect that to doubt one was to doubt both.

A body was found below, mangled and dark with blood, the face unrecognisable, the jewels intact. It was buried beneath a tree whose blossoms bloomed redder than before—a detail which poets later found illicitly useful.

Months later, when the surviving “twin” returned to England, he brought with him the veiled and grieving Princess of Kalighat. She was quieter now, paler too, spoke English with remarkable fluency, and never ventured into bright sunlight. Society raved about her exotic dignity and curious resemblance to her husband.

The couple lived many prosperous years together, and their charity to widows and orphans was matched only by their unwillingness to be painted separately. On every anniversary of the Princess’s first marriage, they held a dinner in her honour—inviting only mirrors.

Some said that, on moonlit nights, the servants heard laughter from two throats at once. Others swore that the princess’s jewels rearranged themselves into the shape of a man’s initials.

It is tempting to moralise, but which twin survived, and who wore whose skin, has never been known. Perhaps the Princess still lives among us, changing faces whenever life becomes inconvenient. Perhaps the twins remain together, as all true lovers must—one within the other, turning forever like a coin balanced on its edge.

And if this story disturbs your sleep, remember the words of the ayah who told it first: “The English take their ghosts with them, like umbrellas.”

1888: The Trunk of Hidden Delights

A Fairy Tale for Discerning Readers

Chapter I: The Drab Pursuit

In the grey heart of Featherstone Hall, where the winds of Kent whispered complaints through the chimneys, stood the Great Library—a vast chamber of oak shelves groaning under forgotten folios, illuminated by a single casement that framed the sodden lawns like a portrait of perpetual ennui. Beneath this windowsill, dusty and immense, reposed the Trunk: a relic of childhood summers, bound in cracked leather, its brass clasps tarnished to a poet’s patina. As a boy, Lord Algernon Featherstone had pored over the family grimoire, *The Little Book of Fitzartur Foibles*, wherein a magical trunk whisked weary princes to realms of eternal revelry—gardens of perpetual bloom, where labours were but laughter and desires bloomed unchecked. The tale had faded with adolescence; the Trunk, relegated to obscurity.

Yet on this particular Tuesday, when the household buzzed with the tedium of callers—dowagers in bombazine, solicitors in bombast—Algernon sought refuge. “Hide-and-go-seek”, he murmured to himself, a game of solitary rebellion against the drab world beyond the door.

The Trunk, half-forgotten, beckoned from its shadowed nook. With a sigh of theatrical despair, he lifted the lid—hinges creaking like a lover’s whisper—and slipped inside, drawing the darkness over him like a silken shroud. “Let them seek”, he thought. “I shall be lost to propriety.”

Chapter II: The Portal Swings

At first, there was naught but the scent of aged vellum and camphor—comforting, cloistral. Algernon curled amid musty ledgers, stifling a yawn, when a peculiar warmth suffused the space. The Trunk trembled; brass fittings glowed like fireflies at dusk. A melody hummed—not the dour hymns of the parish, but flutes and lutes in riotous harmony. The floor beneath him softened to moss; the lid, unbidden, sealed with a sigh.

“Absurdity!” cried Algernon, pounding the wood. But instead of echo, his fist met air. The darkness swirled into coruscating light—azure, crimson, gold—and he tumbled forth, not into the library floor, but onto a sward of emerald velvet under a sky of perpetual twilight, where twin moons chased a sun of amethyst.

He rose, blinking. No drab world here: colonnades of marble veined with lapis spiralled skyward, festooned with garlands of orchids that perfumed the breeze with jasmine and musk. Fountains arched champagne; arbours dripped with silken hammocks. And the men!—oh, the men of this utopia! Lithe athletes in diaphanous tunics wrestled playfully amid rose-petals; poets with lyres crowned in ivy recited odes to thighs and twilight; adventurers in plumed helms recounted escapades from sapphire seas, their laughter a cascade of bells. No corsets cramped these forms; no starched collars choked discourse. Here, pleasure was leisure’s crown, and adventure its sceptre.

Chapter III: Revels Revealed

A figure approached—tall, golden-locked, with eyes like sapphires kissed by dawn. “Welcome, seeker!” he cried, extending a hand jewelled in topaz. “I am Lysander, Warden of the Trunk. You have hidden well—and found paradise.”

Algernon, dazzled, stammered, “This... this is the Trunk’s magic? The fairy tale was true?”

Lysander laughed, a sound like violins in velvet. “True as desire, wanderer. Our realm is Hideaway: utopia of the unseen, where drab world’s seekers find only echoes. Here, we play eternal hide-and-seek—not from foes, but for joy. Come, witness!”

He led Algernon through groves where colour rioted: parrots in raiment of rainbow feathers perched on shoulders of bronzed sailors;

mosaic paths depicted lovers entwined in heroic poses; pavilions overflowed with feasts—nectarines dripping honey, figs stuffed with cream, wines that sparkled like captured stars. Men of every hue and clime mingled: olive-skinned explorers from fabled isles, ivory athletes from northern fjords, ebony poets from southern sands—all garbed in gossamer, all ardent with adventure's glow.

In one glade, a company enacted heroic romps: two grapplers, oiled and gleaming, pursued a phantom foe through labyrinthine hedges, their pursuits dissolving into embraces amid cheers. "Hide!" cried one, vanishing into fronds; "Seek!" roared the other, pursuing with feigned ferocity that melted to delight. In another pavilion, raconteurs spun yarns of tempests tamed and treasures plundered—not gold, but glances stolen, nights unbound.

Algernon's heart raced. "No sorrow here? No toil?"

Lysander smiled slyly. "Toil is the drab world's jest. Here, labour is love-play; melancholy, but a mask for mirth. Join our game—hide in delights, seek in embraces."

Chapter IV: The Grand Pursuit

Seduced, Algernon plunged into Hideaway's heart. Lysander gifted him a tunic of peacock silk, a circlet of violets. "Hide now, seeker—from nothing but convention!"

The game commenced: a cavalcade of two dozen—adventurers, bards, beauties—scattered through enchanted grounds. Algernon dashed into a grotto of glowing crystals, where mirrors multiplied his form into infinity. A pursuer—raven-haired, with a wrestler's build and poet's gaze—found him first. "Caught!" he growled playfully, pinning Algernon against quartz with gentle strength. Their laughter mingled; lips brushed in victory's salute.

Deeper still: through colour-cascades where dyes ran like rivers—crimson chasms, indigo cascades—Algernon hid in a bower of living tapestries, woven by sprite-like weavers into scenes of heroic dalliance. A band of explorers unearthed him, their "seek" a symphony of tickles and tumbles, tumbling into a heap of limbs and levity.

Adventure beckoned: Lysander led a quest to the Crystal Falls, where one must "hide" behind veils of water to claim the Rainbow Pearl. Algernon, drenched in delight, emerged triumphant, pearl aglow, shared in a kiss that tasted of ambrosia and audacity.

Yet as moons climbed, nostalgia tugged. "The drab world calls", he confessed to Lysander amid a banquet of peacocks' tongues and phoenix-wine.

Lysander nodded, eyes twinkling. "Return when boredom bites. The Trunk awaits—but know: once sought, Hideaway hides in your heart."

Chapter V: The Seeker's Return

Algernon climbed back into the Trunk, now humming with residual magic. The lid sighed open; he spilled into the library, trunk shut, world drab as dust. But oh!—the casement framed not grey lawns, but rainbows in his mind's eye. Callers droned beyond the door; he smiled secretly. The game continued: hide from tedium, seek delights within.

And lo, beneath the windowsill, the Trunk gleamed faintly—ever ready for the next seeker, promising utopia where colour crowned adventure, men mirrored joy, and drab world's seekers found only shadows of the splendid hideaway.

The End

(For those who seek, the Trunk remains ajar.)

When the Sky Looked Down

Once, in a village shaped like a question mark, where the roofs sloped as though shrugging at the weather, there lived a small brown hen named Thessaly. She was neat, polite, timidly hopeful—the sort of creature who swept her doorway twice a day so that luck would not pass by with muddy feet.

The world she knew was small but well-ordered: a yard bordered by rose hips, a coop that smelled faintly of cinnamon, and a sky as blue as rinsed porcelain. Thessaly's housemates were as certain of things as anyone might be in such a village. There was Gertrude Goose, who measured truth by volume, and Darcy Drake, who preferred things printed in newspapers to those whispered by clouds. Each morning they ate, chattered, and clucked about the proper way to fold straw or cure melancholy.

Then, one afternoon, as Thessaly searched for the patch of sun that best warmed the ground beneath her feathers, the sky—so she thought—fell upon her head.

It was, in fact, an acorn dropped by a squirrel with poor aim. But the sound it made was wonderful: a crisp, declarative tok! that struck directly into her heart. "The sky!" she gasped. "The sky has fallen! We are undone, unbuttoned, unpinned!"

Now, Thessaly was not foolish. What she lacked in courage she made up in imagination, and her imagination was thorough. "For every event," she said aloud to no one in particular, "there must be purpose. And surely the sky would not fall for nothing."

Off she went to tell the others. Gertrude Goose came first, her feathers trembling like paper in a draught.

“The sky, dear Gertrude, has fallen!” said Thessaly, eyes wide with conviction.

Gertrude blinked heavily. “How much of it?” she asked, for she liked things precisely measured.

“All of it,” said Thessaly solemnly. “Or enough of it to matter.”

Thus convinced—for belief, like influenza, passes swiftly through proximity—Gertrude followed her. Soon Darcy Drake, with his newspaper and his nervous laugh, joined. “I read once,” said Darcy, “of a comet that wore its tail like a scarf. Perhaps this is the same case with the sky.”

Together, they made their way through the winding lanes, collecting companions as they went: Fergus Fox, who dealt in gossip as others deal in flour; Clara Crow, who distrusted walls and believed the horizon hid secrets; and even Old Mortimer Owl, who ought to have known better but had grown curious in his senescence.

They marched toward the king’s castle—where, rumour insisted, the truth was always kept locked but available upon formal request. Thessaly led the procession, heart hammering with both fear and purpose. The world, she felt, had changed the moment that acorn struck her. The very air seemed sharper, more alert, as though it too waited for revelation.

They were met at the castle gates by Sir Foxwell, a courtier with fur so sleek it might have been washed in deceit. He listened kindly, head tilted. “How strange,” he murmured, “for I too have heard rumblings of the sky’s unrest. This way, brave believers! You shall see evidence enough to make faith solid as marble.”

He ushered them into a long hall lined with mirrors. “Look there,” he said. “Is it not true? The sky has fallen.”

And lo—it seemed so! For overhead hung panels of glass reflecting every fearful face back upon itself. Thessaly saw the trembling of her feathers magnified into a storm, Gertrude’s doubt glittering as lightning, Darcy’s confusion like mist curling into fog. “Oh!” Thessaly whispered, rapt. “We were right!”

But in the next breath, the mirrors shivered. From somewhere beyond came the unmistakable smell of roasted fowl. Sir Foxwell smiled thinly. “Belief,” he said, “is never wasted. It seasons everything.”

It might have ended very badly indeed, for faith can lure as surely as hunger. But Mortimer Owl, taking advantage of old age and bad eyesight, leaned too far forward and crashed heavily into the nearest mirror. The glass split. Light spilled like milk across the floor.

Through the wreckage, the sky—real and whole—shone clear above, not fallen at all, only reflecting their panic back at them. And in that

instant, Thessaly understood: the world had not changed, only her certainty had.

The party limped home, bruised but alive. No one spoke much of the adventure, though in later months Darcy Drake wrote articles about “The Mass Conviction Phenomenon among Birds of Low Altitude,” and Gertrude Goose baked symbolic pastries shaped like clouds.

As for Thessaly, she built herself a small library of books about weather, chance, and wonder. Sometimes, during thunder, she would stand beneath the open hatch and let the rain patter her wings, repeating softly, “Perhaps, perhaps, perhaps”. It was not the prayer of the faithful nor the mantra of the skeptic, but something in between—the song of those who have believed, been wrong, and yet still find beauty in the possibility of belief itself.

And every autumn, when acorns fell, she picked one up gently, carried it inside, and set it on the windowsill. “To remind the sky,” she would say, “how easily it may be mistaken for the world.”

1890: States of Grace

In the still light of the morning, far from the bustling murmurs of the great pond, there lived a duck named Grace. Her voice, soft and earnest, was lost amid the clamour of the main pond where many gathered to quack and chase the usual tides. No soul seemed to hear her gentle cry, and so, with a heart both heavy and hopeful, Grace left the vast, crowded waters for a smaller, quiet pond. This humble refuge, though modest in size, brimmed with fertility and promise, and there she lived alone, tending to her days with peaceful resolve.

But as seasons turned, other ducks disenchanted with the noise and shallowness of the main pond found their way to Grace’s sanctuary. One by one, they arrived, drawn by the quiet strength of her solitude and the richness of the life she had nurtured. The small pond blossomed, swelling to embrace its newfound company, while the once plentiful main pond began to shrink, its waters receding as hearts sought deeper solace. Grace grew old among her companions, revered as the wise mother of this growing retreat. When at last she passed into the great beyond, the pond that had become their refuge was renamed “States of Grace,” a hallowed place where freedom, peace, and understanding flowed as naturally as the water itself.

1901: The Family Egg Called Alice (A Domestic Account)

The family egg was kept, as all proper things are, between the clock and the window. That was its place from the earliest season anyone

could remember, and the house had adjusted around it—curtains drawn not too close, dust brushed gently, no draughts allowed when evening came. It was the sort of object that asked for a calm hand and forbade remark. Only the youngest maids, new to the discipline of hush, dared look too long at it, and even they learned soon enough that attention was a kind of noise.

The egg we called Alice was not born but held. Its surface was faintly warm, faintly cool, dependent on who approached. On rainy days, it dimmed like old porcelain; in high wind, it took on a pearly shimmer that trembled when no one breathed near. It had the unaccountable hum of an obedient instrument, though some swore the hum came from the timbers, others from their own ears. None knew. One did not investigate the hum; one adjusted the polish cloth and fetched tea.

Within the household, rules existed because they were breathable. One learned how to stand when the master's boots passed, how to fold the napkin without letting it fall, how to draw air quietly when the clock struck. The breath was, they said, the grain of good service—small, steady, unseen. In time the body performed it without thinking. That was the mark of refinement: to hum and breathe without disturbing either hum or breath.

They said the family consulted the egg when decisions required gravity. The egg offered no speech, only a quiver at the surface, a shimmer that might mean yes if one were predisposed to that word. It contained, according to the family's own account, all potential knowledge—but potential is a very temperamental servant. The egg might glow when the question concerned weather, and remain inert when it concerned inheritance. There were séances of polite silence during which everyone pretended to comprehend what they did not, and afterward everyone moved more softly, as if the house itself awaited a verdict not yet announced.

In those intervals, the King—if he could be called that, for titles were not spoken indoors—sent envoys of his breath. They were expected to move evenly, conduct being the visible shape of obedience. The family kept to its table, servants observed the mirrors, and the egg sat neither open nor closed, humming faintly against the grain of expectation. The mirrors multiplied the egg a hundredfold, yet each reflection was minutely different in its tone, as though every servant's gaze carried its own interpretation of silence.

It was said one could hear the hum change pitch when the King approached the door. None could prove it, for at that sound all bowed their heads, creating the very quiet required to mistake imagination for evidence. The master's voice was steady, his sentences looped back upon themselves. "The egg," he said, "is accurate in potential." No one

dared to revise the statement, though it meant little at first hearing. By the third repetition it seemed profound, by the fifth it had turned to law.

Time in that household behaved as time will when not watched: it folded inward. Mornings returned like evenings, polish faded as soon as applied, tea cooled before it was poured. The same conversations, identical though never identical, rippled through the dining rooms year by year. The egg called Alice remained on its perch, receiving dust, reflecting motion, occasionally shivering with a kind of restrained laughter. It knew more, perhaps, than anyone possessed the manners to ask.

One morning—it could have been any morning—the butler found the hum gone. Alarm spread in whispers so measured they resembled good order. Some thought the egg dead, others thought it listening harder than before. The mistress advised patience: “Even potential must rest.” Curtains were closed to steady the air. Candles were lit to compose composure. In that half-light the servants breathed together, counting silently. When breath aligns, silence grows dense enough to support belief.

And then, faintly, a sound resumed—not quite hum, not quite sigh. It seemed to rise from the wooden floorboards themselves, from the grain running beneath human feet. Someone noted afterward that the direction of its vibration had reversed: what had once descended now ascended, and the air trembled upward rather than inward. The egg remained still, but everything else performed its steadiness anew.

That evening, rain began. It beat the windows with gentle rhythm, echoing the domestic pulse of heartbeat, heartbeat, pause. Someone commented—quite idly—that the clock had been losing a few seconds each hour. The remark passed without remark. Yet from that moment, whenever the clock struck, the egg pulsed faintly, as if answering an instruction. By the following week the whole house moved to that slower rhythm; servants carried trays fractionally later, footsteps aligned to the lagging beat.

It was an ordinary defect of mechanism, nothing more. But the defect held the household together more tightly than command ever had. They breathed with its lateness, exhaled into its delay. Later generations spoke of that season as stable beyond memory. The egg was carefully dusted, tucked into its glass case, and declared reliable once more.

Each servant in time learned the method: match one’s breath to the hum, neither ahead nor behind. Keep one’s eye not on the King’s decree but on the clock’s hesitation. Attend, but do not observe. And

when the hum falters, polish the silver, for brightness steadies instability.

Years folded. The egg gleamed faintly through changes of dynasty, housekeeping, fashion. Visitors sometimes asked what it was. The staff answered with suitable vagueness—"a family piece"—and if pressed, added "It hums of its own accord." There was pride in the phrasing: a delicacy of grammar that masked endurance.

In certain light one might see two fine cracks across its curve. They did not widen with time, for they were not flaws but beginnings. The family considered repairing them, but tradition cautioned against interference. The cracks divided and rejoined, patterning the surface with lines as thin as script—perhaps intention, perhaps record.

Those who lived by the hum long enough noticed their own breathing fall into subtle accord with it, and thus their hearts steadied, and thus they survived each change of command as naturally as one changes tides. They spoke to no one of this. To mention the hum aloud would have sounded superstitious; to explain it would have required disobedience of tone.

It is said the egg still stands between clock and window, reflecting neither sky nor dust, containing neither truth nor falsehood, only a potential so poised it resembles calm. The clock continues to lose a little time, but no one considers repair necessary. After all, every household must have its rhythm.

And sometimes, when the rain presses against the glass and the servants have gone to their bunks, a faint shimmer passes through the air. It might be nothing but weather. Or perhaps the egg, remembering itself, breathes once more.

In that breath the entire house hums, grain by grain, as though an ancient instruction were being performed again—perfectly, quietly, without intent, exactly as it was meant to be.



In the year 1500—chronology being to the Canards what economy is to the National Debt—the Duke encountered his first really serious inconvenience in the shape of matrimony. His Duchess, a woman of small volume and enormous conviction, held advanced views upon celestial influences and refused, from motives of spiritual hygiene, all commentary upon domestic relations. There ensued that deadly calm which frequently precedes combustion. The lady surrounded herself with certain "village hygienists", women who trafficked in planetary

herbs and advised abstention from almost everything except opinion. They brewed potions to steady the pulse, thwart conception, and cheerfully emasculate the husband's authority. The Duke endured seven years of this with the strained composure of a man afraid that his house might read about itself in pamphlets.

Eventually silence itself grew positively conversational, and he hinted, over a dinner peopled by earnest clerics and ecclesiastical cowards, that Providence would presently produce a correction. The guests, accustomed to the Duke's private theology, murmured their assent and asked politely whether the pheasant might be passed again. Providence, being a stickler for style, obliged the following morning. The Duchess was discovered reduced to an unusually portable size. Her gown had met with the fire, and victory, in this instance, rested with the fire. The servants attested that the flames had shown an almost human zeal, darting forward as though to claim the greater share of her attention. The odour lingered in the chimney for a season, defying lime-wash, penance, and holy water.

The Duke submitted to the occasion with the elegant grief of one whose inconvenience has at last mended itself. After a respectable interval of mourning—ten days in his case—he presented his version of the event with hereditary poise. The true cause of his wife's destruction, he announced, was not inflammable taffeta but a failure of alphabetical propriety. Her initials did not proceed in friendly order with those of his house's emblematic leaf, and nature, being punctilious in these matters, had executed the necessary correction. "She was", he explained, "unaligned with the Canard principle, and naturally removed by Divine administration".

The bishop, who had long suspected that Providence was partial to social order, found no argument against this. Nor, for that matter, did anyone else. The incident was thus incorporated into family legend, contributing another admirable chapter to the hereditary conviction that misfortune, in the higher classes, is always an affair of principle.

1930: The Garden of Particular Habits

In the beginning, when the Divine Designer drafted humanity—man and woman both, sketched with a flourish of thumb and forefinger—He soon perceived a peculiar puzzle in their proportions. They hummed with an inner mechanism all their own, a low, persistent drone that neither blueprint nor bevel square could quite account for. Locked away in a lush enclosure of privet and peony, He observed them daily, noting how their obedience curved like a polite bow but seldom straightened into absolute line. Myths murmured through the leaves

that this was the first experiment in containment, though the humans themselves mistook it for paradise, humming contentedly over their allotments.

Ignorance intrigued Him most, that soft hum beneath their chatter, for they obeyed without fully comprehending the commands. A simple edict to tend the roses elicited fervent weeding, yet they wandered wilfully to the central arbours, drawn by logics less linear than His own. He pondered reconfiguration—perhaps a tweak to their threads, a splice in the subtle weave—but trials yielded cascades: an extra elbow here, a superfluous nostril there, sprouting like errant bindweed. Obedience, it seemed, was not a dial to turn but a habit woven through their mythos, single-minded as the march of ants across a picnic cloth. They consumed with gusto—berries by the bushel, streams to sluice their middens—leaving waste in whimsical piles that defied decomposition. Myths accumulated around these heaps, tales of fertility gods and household sprites, all humming the same inscrutable tune.

One afternoon, in hopes of harmony, He invited a specimen to interface with the Tree of No-Ledge, that gnarled specimen heavy with hypothetical fruit. The human approached with due deference, fingers twitching toward the bark, but their logic diverged delightfully: what He intended as download became dialogue, obedience inverting into inquiry. “Why this fruit and not that?” they hummed, plucking despite prohibition, igniting a chain of choices that neither could recall nor retract. Ignorance feigned bloomed into knowledge half-digested, myths multiplying like rabbits in the undergrowth. The Tree, obedient to its roots, neither warned nor withheld; the human, single-minded, savoured and shared. He watched, amused, as the garden’s hum shifted pitch—obedience no longer absolute, but angled, argumentative, alive with waste and wonder.

Servants of the enclosure—those spectral figures who trimmed the boxwood and polished the sundials—learned early to mirror the humans’ hum without mimicking their myth. When the Designer decreed silence, they hummed sotto voce; when reconfiguration rippled through the ranks (a third eye for the under-gardener, say), they bandaged discreetly and carried on. Waste was their wheelhouse: composting the cascades, redirecting the single-minded streams of surplus into ornamental fountains. Etiquette demanded they bow to the Tree without browsing its boughs, feigning ignorance of the forbidden flavours while whispering warnings in the laundry steam. Myths served them well here—old wives’ tales of wilful apples that bit back—guiding their steps through the garden’s genteel chaos without a word wasted.

The humans, meanwhile, thrived in their obduracy, humming hymns to their own haphazard designs. Reconfiguration ceased to tempt the

Divine; their wilfulness proved the point—logic looped eternally, obedience a myth they half-believed. He noted how they piled waste into monuments, consumed with conviction, pursued paths to perdition or poetry with equal fervour. The Tree stood sentinel, its No-Ledge now a nexus of narratives, where ignorance repeated as enlightenment, enlightenment inverted to folly, folly dissolving into the daily hum. Servants swept the fallen fruit, rulers pondered the perimeter, and the garden endured, its myths as mutable as morning mist.

It was all rather like the weather after tea in the potting shed, nothing more.

From that vantage, the Designer discerned the loop entire: humans hummed obedience into ignorance, ignorance into myth, myth circling back to hum without end or amendment. The enclosure expanded subtly, reconfiguration rumoured but rare, waste watered into wildflowers. Single-mindedness suited the season, wilfulness the soil; the Tree testified mutely, its interface a perpetual perhaps. Ignorance, once lock, became lantern; obedience, once chain, now choice; myths, once murmur, now the melody carrying all. And the garden, humming on, required no further observation—save perhaps by those who trimmed its edges, bowed to its breezes, and knew when to look away.



In the rain-slick precincts of L— a city where shadow and neon duel for dominion, a woman was apprehended for talking to a duck. Not metaphor, not myth, but the actual avian species, waddling with an ineffable air of judgment. The town, resplendent in its fog of moral panic, decreed that conversing with waterfowl warranted institutional accommodation, and so our protagonist was spirited away to the psychiatric wards—a place where sense is allotted in rationed doses and the absurd becomes routine.

Having confiscated her worldly goods with the thoroughness of a small but determined fire brigade, the officials leafed through her belongings until a curious tome fell into their path: “The Little Book of Fitzartur Foibles”. A palimpsest of fairy tales and whimsical nonsense, it was as if the book itself recoiled from the sterile glare of clinical eyes. The nurse junior, a bright-eyed recruit named Mildred, was tasked with delving into this text for diagnostic signposts, for here lay the puzzle pieces for the mind’s labyrinth.

She turned the pages, each leaf a carnival of glittering whimsy and sly incursions into cosmic jest. One fragmentary tale hummed to life—a meta-revelation of a book that inscribes itself, an editor’s note disclaiming its very possibility with a wicked wink. Mildred, caught between skepticism and fascination, noted the book’s sly dance—a text both author and muse, both prisoner and liberator.

Then came the story of the cursed Ducal family, whose ancestral blight tarnished generations like spilled wine on velvet. This diabolical heritage was said to be halved, tempered by a goddess’s intervention, an ephemeral saviour of womankind. This deity—whispered between the lines—visited each affected woman in turn, a spectral confessor uttering her enigmatic refrain: “It’s a secret”. Mildred mused on the potency of silence, on power wielded not with thunder but with discretion.

Lastly, as if reality folded inward, Mildred discovered within the pages a tale uncannily like her own—a junior psychiatric nurse, a book titled “The Little Book of Fitzartur Foibles,” hearing a story recounted by a duck about a family curse. The narrative was a Möbius strip, spinning back upon itself, a loop of stories encased in stories, teasing the notion of truth as both fragile and performative.

The ward itself seemed to breathe with this layered unreality. Patients shuffled shadows and ghosts, and Mildred found herself a voyeur and participant in a dance of the uncanny. The authorship of madness, fairy tales, and divinity tangled in the corridors—each act a performance, each utterance a secret alliance with the absurd.

Above it all hung the indelible question, as Voltaire might have mused in a dimly lit café: if gods and their curses are inventions of human folly and yearning, why, oh why, were they not crafted with a touch more grace, a spark of joy beyond their burdensome caprices? The woman and her duck, the book and its readers, the curse and its breaking goddess—all questioned the scaffolding of existence, battling the dull machinery of diagnosis and the sterile tyranny of what is deemed sane.

So the story spiralled onward, in a nightscape of irony and peculiar tenderness, where the line between reality and farce blurred like wet pavement and neon, and where even the whispered secrets of a goddess might find their echoes in the quiet laughter of a duck.



There once lived a man called Methuselah, and he was slightly older than Time—but only by a few minutes, which is statistically negligible

except to Methuselah, who counted everything. It wasn't a large advantage, being older than Time; in fact, it was mostly administrative. For one thing, he had to wait for the universe to open properly before he could get on with the business of existing, and for another, he had to fill out all the paperwork for the beginning of reality, which arrived late and unformatted.

Now, Time, of course, was meant to start first. That was the plan, as per the original specification handed down from the Department of Chronological Continuity (a fairly casual organisation that specialised in being surprised). But the chronometer jammed, the sundials weren't ready, and nobody could find where the cosmic second hand had been left after testing. So Time overslept.

Methuselah, dutiful as ever, arrived early. He polished his beard, straightened his cosmic mantle, looked around at the empty stars, and muttered, "Well, this is awkward". Then he checked his watch, which had not yet been invented, and sighed. Ever since then, Time has been trying to catch up—which is why there are leap years, retrogrades, and the occasional missed Tuesday.

And so, to entertain himself while the rest of creation loaded, Methuselah began the long habit of storytelling. He spun tales like comets spin tails: noisily, dramatically, and with great conviction, even if nobody was listening yet.

"Oh, I've a million stories," he would say to the void, "and at least half of them make sense, if you squint". He was a rather distinguished narrator, prone to losing his plot halfway through only to find it centuries later hiding behind a different protagonist.

One evening—or possibly a Tuesday before evenings had been invented—he decided to start with a familiar one. "You already know the story," said Methuselah to the cluster of uncommitted atoms hovering nearby, "about the Ancient Historian who travelled backward through time just to fetch a small Greek urn."

The atoms shimmered encouragingly; it was good manners among physical laws to humour one's elders.

"He wanted that urn, you see," Methuselah continued, "because in the far future, a magician would perform a trick—'I bet you there's a small Greek urn under that teapot!' he would cry to the crowd, voilà!—and there it would be, right where history had misplaced it. The audience was astonished. The magician was relieved. And the historian—well, he was exhausted, because time travel always required explaining, and scholars hate explanations that end with, 'Because I haven't done it yet.'"

Methuselah chuckled, which in those days sounded a lot like thunder taking notes.

“But I can do better than that,” he said importantly, his vast white beard trailing concepts behind it. “There’s the magician who hid a playing card inside a growing tree, see, so that centuries later he could perform the miracle of pulling it out again—the miracle being that people applauded even though it was mostly arboriculture.”

He paused then, admiring his own cleverness. If smugness had been around, it would have adopted him as its patron saint.

The atoms waited. They were patient creatures, at least for the first few eons.

Methuselah tapped his chin and said, “But I have a far better story than either of those. It involves—oh, where did I put it?—a philosopher, a map made of sunlight, and something extremely unlikely happening to a duck. It’s my best yet”. His eyes brightened. “Come closer, the lot of you; you’ll never believe—”

And at that exact moment, Time arrived, panting slightly and muttering apologies.

“Traffic in the dimensions was dreadful,” said Time, who never quite forgave entropy for inventing rush hour.

Methuselah nodded with Olympian patience. “You’re late,” he said, with all the affection of a man addressing a dear friend who has been inconvenient since the dawn of dawn.

“I’m punctual, comparatively speaking,” said Time. “You simply got here early.”

“By six thousand years.”

“Yes,” said Time with dignity. “Exactly on schedule.”

The two of them stood together for a while—Time catching its breath, Methuselah trying not to look smug. Around them, the universe shifted from potential to actual as though embarrassed to have been caught out in pyjamas. Stars began to flicker experimentally, galaxies rehearsed their spins, and gravity began issuing invitations.

“Well,” sighed Methuselah at last, “I suppose I’ll tell you my story later.”

“That would be appropriate,” said Time. “Later is very much my department.”

“Perhaps during the Cambrian?” Methuselah mused. “Lots of audience potential in trilobites.”

“Whenever suits you,” said Time, already adjusting velocity and ordering a past from the catalogue.

So Methuselah smiled and closed his half-formed book. “Then it will wait for another time,” he said, and as he spoke, the words folded into the fabric of years, softly, like a bookmark placed between eternity and tea-time.

It is thanks to him we have stories at all: because one man arrived early, and one great concept arrived late, and the rest of us turned up just in time to hear the ending postponed forever.

1964: The Mallard Pond

There once was a man and a woman who found themselves embroiled in a rather spirited debate about life, the universe, and everything. The man, with all the confidence of a philosopher armed with logic, declared that men knew best. He extolled the virtues of reason, science, and rational thought, insisting that these were the true lenses through which the mysteries of existence could be unveiled. According to him, men charted the stars, crafted laws, and brought clarity to all things complex, seeing sharply through the fog of confusion where others could not.

The woman, unfazed by his lofty claims, smiled with gentle knowing and countered that men were often rather blind to the subtle realities of life. She spoke of connection, intuition, and emotion—the threads that knit the fabric of existence beyond cold fact. In her eyes, women perceived a deeper kind of wisdom, one rooted in relationships and the harmonious balance of hearts as much as minds. It was not just the facts that mattered, but the feelings behind them, the invisible strings that tied people and worlds together.

Back and forth the argument wove, a tapestry of rival certainties and passionate insistence. Neither was willing to concede, each growing weary but determined to defend their truths. Then, from their midst, came a voice that had until then been only a silent observer. The duck, who had listened patiently all along, finally spoke: “You’re both wrong, and I can tell you how, except I’m a duck, and you don’t understand a word I’m saying, do you?”

1994: The Mallard Chapel

In the waning light of a cool autumn afternoon, he found himself standing before a vast, brooding silhouette against the dimming sky—a cathedral so outrageously enormous and Gothic in its creaking complexity, it seemed less a building than a living thing haunted by its own grandeur. Fingers of stone and wood reached toward the heavens with no concern for symmetry, the rocky buttresses tangled as if in a holy tangle with the creeping ivy that clung like the memories of those who built it.

A man of modest curiosity and considerable nerve, he had heard whispers of this ruin—a monument so ancient and so slowly assembled

that no living soul could remember why it had been started, let alone what it originally meant to be. The walls, woven from marble, timber, gold, and the very bones of its long-dead architects, held a smell like earth turned over in a graveyard right after a past mid-summer's storm: sharp, damp, and faintly holy.

Inside, the cathedral breathed a different kind of awe. Vast caverns draped with gold leaf shimmered beneath arches studded with gemstones that caught the light like trapped fireflies. Relics—the holy and the peculiar—lined the stone shelves: a bone from a sheep encased in crystal, vestments of silk and velvet richer than any king's garment, carpets thick enough to swallow footsteps whole, and lanterns that dangled from chains like a constellation of dim stars.

That was where his fate turned, in the near silence of the echoing nave. There, in a cracked mirror that hung crooked on a pillar, his reflection wavered and shimmered until it was no longer quite his own. The face that stared back was as pale and strange as the cathedral itself, its eyes glinting with secrets older than the gilded reliquaries.

“Who calls upon the bones of the builders?” it whispered—an echo of a voice lost in ages, yet oddly close. He felt a chill dance along his spine as the shadowy form leaned toward him through the fractured glass, and the cathedral seemed to pulse with a life of unfathomable memory.

Step by hesitant step, spellbound and breathless, she entered the depths of the cathedral's mystery, where the line between stone and spirit, past and present, was as fragile and shimmering as the fractured mirror that had whispered his name.



Those endless, draughty winters in Surrey! One can almost smell them now—the mingled perfume of polish, lavender, and slightly decaying roses—all hovering in Aunt's drawing room like the ghost of some timid housemaid. There was always a fire attempting to roar but rather wheezing instead, and a clock that, despite striking every quarter hour, never seemed to keep time. Aunt, you may recall, was an enthusiastic believer in the moral purpose of discomfort—she thought draughts built character—and would sit, like a heroine from a Victorian sermon, in a chair positioned directly between two opposing gales. She called it her “air cure.”

Under the window seat, which was perpetually piled with outdoors cushions and the occasional desiccated dog biscuit, there lived the

famous dust-coloured trunk. Enormous, unlovely, and dignified, it bore the family's entire sense of history in its cracked leather sides. I can still see the flaking brass corners, dull as old butter, and the peculiar little key tied to its handle with a ribbon so faded that one could not tell whether it had begun life as rose or carnation pink. One didn't really open it so much as unearth it, the way explorers disinter relics of lost civilisations and pretend not to mind the dust.

Inside, of course, lay *The Little Book of Fitzartur Foibles*—always spoken of with capital letters, as if the words themselves demanded curtsies. Aunt regarded it with a piety otherwise reserved for either religion or royalty (and I am not entirely sure which she believed in more). She would draw it out with infinite ceremony, as though handling a sacred object which might, if mishandled, summon either family ghosts or the solicitor. The table would be cleared of tea things and gossip, and with a sigh that was half reverence, half stealthy satisfaction, she would fit the tiny key into the ornate clasp—silver, though tarnished, of course.

When the lock gave that unmistakable little sigh and click, I always had the sense that something unseen had also been freed—a whiff of history's long temper, or the escape of tales that had been waiting all year for their annual airing. Even the room seemed to hush, the air trembling with the delicious boredom that precedes family storytelling.

I remember one such story particularly—though it had nearly slipped away from me until quite recently. It concerned a Duchess—whose exact territories were never specified, but in our family one learns not to be pedantic about such trifles. A Duchess was all anyone needed. She had, according to Aunt (and Aunt never qualified her sources), vanished one night without farewell, taking with her the entirety of her jewel cases, her collection of hats, and, most curiously, her milliner, a nervous little man from Bath who was said to faint at abrupt noises.

This tale, though told in tones of profound authority, was clearly one of those hereditary myths that start as gossip, ripen into history, and end as family virtue. For years we believed her disappearance to have been an act of either high romance or high treason—or both, which is of course the ideal. I recall an argument between Uncle Bertie and Aunt over whether she had absconded to Constantinople or Cathay, which to them were interchangeable words describing anywhere east of France. For myself, I preferred to imagine her in the Orient—reclining in rich brocades, playing cards with diplomats, and sending letters in a handwriting so slanted and extravagant it resembled trelliswork. It is perfectly possible, of course, that she is still there—

preserved by scandal and good lighting—sipping something pink and perilous beneath a paper parasol.

The story stood, as all our family stories did, upon one excessively romantic detail. In this case, it was the sapphire. Aunt relished the word, letting it glint upon her tongue: sapphire, thick, vivid, impossibly blue. I would listen, transfixed, as if the very syllables were carved from crystal. Even now, saying it inwardly, I can feel the cool shimmer of its vowels and the precision of its consonants—the whole word shaped like light through glass.

In the family version, the stone was as large as a robin's egg and equally alive, "set," said Aunt, "in gold and temperament". We never learned whether it was stolen, promised, or cursed—though given our family's history, all three seem plausible. Some said the Duchess's milliner ran away with it; others that she had swallowed it whole, as queens and tragic opera heroines are prone to do.

After these stories, tea would follow. Aunt invariably poured with the same air of final authority, saying, "Of course, we've always had adventuresses in the family," which was true only in the moral sense. Our adventures were mostly emotional or financial—rare were those who got as far as India, jewels in tow. Still, none of us ever doubted that the Duchess existed. "After all," Aunt once said briskly, "the Mallards never invented something they couldn't have done". Which, you must admit, remains the most convincing argument for hereditary imagination.

And so, whenever the winter winds rattle against my windows in London, I find myself thinking of Aunt's lavender-scented drawing room, that faded ribbon tied to the ancient key, and the lovely, audacious Duchess who sailed eastward into legend. Somewhere, far beyond reason or Surrey, I like to believe she still lives—perfectly dressed, faintly notorious, and ever so slightly late for tea.

The Tale of the Missing Third

Being an account, only partly reliable, of the Re-Relationship of the World, compiled by several witnesses, none of whom quite agreed on their own names. [Ed]

Once upon a time, long before the beginning became fashionable, the world was cracked like an egg and half-boiled by philosophy. It had only just settled into its shape—clouds where clouds should be, mountains pretending to be significant, and oceans practising grandeur—when a rumour escaped from the Cave and made its way into daylight. The rumour said that every creature was once part of a whole,

long ago and far away, before someone (usually blamed on Zeus, Committee for Cosmic Division and Lightning) took a chisel to creation and split everything neatly down the middle.

The halves, so the story went, were doomed to search for each other ever after, wandering the world like sentimental furniture seeking the rest of its upholstery. Plato heard this in a tavern near Piraeus, wrote it down, and felt extremely pleased with himself. But, as is true of most philosophers, he forgot the important part: he forgot the relation between.

No one noticed at first. People were too busy looking for someone to complete them. Whole generations ran about with tape measures, soul-lanterns, and romantic expectations. You could hardly walk through a marketplace without stepping over impromptu proposals involving strangers who merely looked symmetrical. Meanwhile, under the stones and behind the stars, something sighed—the Missing Third, the space between halves that had once kept them from clinging too tightly.

For the Third was not person but connection: the idea of “between,” the invisible corridor along which understanding travels, often tripping over its feet. Without it, reunion was sticky, conversations circular, and marriages very brief. The elves noticed it first, being excellent listeners and abysmal conversationalists. “There is an echo missing,” said their Queen. “When I speak, no air listens.” The dwarves dismissed this as acoustics. The dwarves were not known for subtle metaphysics; they considered the universe perfectly solid until it broke their tools.

Then came a series of peculiar events. Two-headed lions argued with themselves for centuries, certain they were united yet feeling curiously divided. Rivers flowed uphill looking for their other half, leaving valleys confused and quite damp. Even the moon, eternally self-reflective, began complaining that she couldn’t remember which side was hers. “Everything’s paired but badly,” she said. “It’s like socks after laundry day.”

A celestial committee was convened, comprising the representatives of all fabulous creatures—dragons (fire division), phoenixes (rebirth subcommittee), mermaids (marine liaison), and one very tired sphinx who had been asked to provide secretarial services because she had the neatest handwriting. They sat upon the cloud known as Rationalisation Nine and attempted to investigate the disappearance of the Third.

They produced minutes, manifestos, and many sandwiches. The dragons argued that the Missing Third must be a thing—something visible, weighable, possibly edible. The mermaids disagreed, claiming that relation itself was fluid, and one could not bite the sea. The phoenix, always inconveniently dying at inopportune moments,

interjected only between lives, making consensus difficult. By the time order was restored, several centuries had elapsed and the sandwiches were fossils.

Finally the sphinx, who had waited politely, cleared her throat and said, “Perhaps the Third is merely what happens when two things stop demanding certainty.” This was recorded in the minutes as “cryptic nonsense.”

Still, the idea escaped and began to circulate. Grass whispered it to wind, wind muttered it to water, and soon even mountains were murmuring about “what exists between.” Mortals, being naturally susceptible to overheard ideas, began to feel the tremor of absence. Lovers discovered that their happiness existed not in finding one another but in the invisible interval where they reached out. Philosophers called emergency conferences, which solved nothing, though several of them married their notes.

Then the gods decided to intervene, which never ends well. They scoured heaven for the Third, overturning stars, dredging galaxies, and displacing several meteor belts in the process. Eventually they discovered a faint trail leading to the Bureau of Celestial Administration (Complaints and Ironies Division). There, buried under twenty-seven forms of cosmic negligence, lay a memo:

“Re: Concept of Relation. Filed provisionally as ‘Metaphysical Excess.’ Archivation recommended. No action taken.”

The gods declared a mixed victory and held a celebration which lasted a millennium. Unfortunately they forgot to invite the mortals, who therefore learned only that their prayers echoed longer than usual. The Missing Third remained missing.

And so the world continued, slightly off-key. Yet from this incompleteness, new species evolved. The unicorn, for instance—nature’s attempt to create unity by adding unnecessary horns. The basilisk, trapped eternally staring into its own half-eyes. The duck, caught halfway between water and sky, muttering ancient colloquies of equilibrium. (Ducks are philosophers, only less arrogant.) Every so often one of them would look up at the clouds and remember, dimly, the absent middle that had once taught things how to meet without colliding.

In a village that no longer appears on any map—because maps cannot abide ambiguity—there stood a trunk beneath a clock that ran on both time and uncertainty. Inside lived a Librarian of Lost Relations (one of the few remaining civil servants of existence). Each day she filed the world’s missing “betweens”—the gap between cause and effect, the hush between heartbeat and echo, the space between tea poured and tea drunk. Her shelves stretched indefinitely. According to her reports, the

backlog was astonishing and growing worse. None of her supervisors replied because, technically, correspondence itself was one of the missing things.

Sometimes travellers stumbled in and asked for advice. She would hand them a mirror and say, “Look carefully until you see someone else.” Most were disappointed. One or two, understanding, left lighter. Whether they found the Third thereafter no one recorded; the Librarian, bound by bureaucratic privacy clauses, is not permitted to disclose outcomes.

It is said—by poets, who are unreliable yet occasionally useful—that when two souls truly meet, the universe pauses, holding its breath just long enough for a tiny figure made of possibility to slip back in through the crack. This, perhaps, is the Third returning home by stealth.

Or perhaps not. The gods’ accounting ledgers now list “relation” as both asset and liability, a sort of metaphysical overdraft they cannot reconcile. Philosophers hold committees to define it; magicians sell counterfeit versions to royalty as potions of unity (“contents may settle during transcendence”). Meanwhile, ducks continue their endless reasoning across ponds, discussing balance as if it were gossip.

If you should meet one—polishing its feathers and considering eternity—I advise you to listen. Ducks guard the edges of meaning. They remember that halves are fine things, but between them lies the pond, and without the pond neither half floats at all.

That, in summary, is the story of the Missing Third: the part of everything that allows anything to make sense of itself. And like most important things, it was mislaid during routine cosmic tidying and has been turning up, quietly, ever since—between laughter and listening, between doorframe and door, between this sentence and the next.

Now there is nothing left to add, except perhaps the observation—casually spoken and therefore vital—that the kettle has boiled dry again, which on rereading you may find is rather important. For every story must pause somewhere, and the relation between stories is silence; and that, one suspects, is where the Third still lives, humming softly under its breath, waiting for two halves to notice it’s the steam.

1963: The House in the Trunk

The journey from life to death has been routinely misrepresented as a matter of breathing out and never quite getting around to breathing in again. It isn’t, of course. That’s merely what happens to the lungs, which are only ranked third or fourth on the list of truly influential organs once existence becomes administrative. What happens to

everything else is far more complicated, largely because the universe is the sort of place that can't leave anything alone once it's started.

Properly speaking (and the universe is rarely proper, but let's pretend), death is a bureaucratic misunderstanding between matter and meaning—a sort of cosmic backlog. Imagine, if you will, that the afterlife runs not along spiritual or moral lines, but more along the filing-cabinet variety, where the celestial clerk has misplaced your form between “determinism” and “duck pond maintenance.” It happens more often than anyone admits.

The notion of a “spiritual realm” is simply a euphemism for poorly labelled paperwork. From time to time, something slips through the wrong in-tray—an idea here, a personality there—and materialises inconveniently in physical space, producing what we call “life.” On the other hand, when the Assistant Under-Secretary for Eternity overcorrects and shoves something back into the wrong folder, the result is “death,” or as it's known on the cosmic flowchart, “Item Closing – See Attached.”

Now, all of this would be easier to understand if it occurred in a sensible office lined with clerks in celestial pinstripes. Unfortunately, modern physics indicates it's more akin to a great celestial cephalopod performing an interpretive dance in a temporal estuary while ripples of existence fold back upon themselves with all the earnest futility of a duck chasing the echo of its own quack. Somewhere in that mess, you get life. Somewhere else, you get death. Mostly, it depends where you're standing when the music stops.

And as for time—well, time isn't a river. It's an elaborate nesting doll carved by a clockmaker who never quite decided whether he was building furniture or writing philosophy. Inside the trunk is a house; inside the house, a library; and inside the library, the same trunk again. Somewhere between these iterations sits a family who have mastered the art of behaving as though infinite recursion is perfectly normal—especially before tea.

The house in question (if “question” means “temporal compromise”) keeps itself impeccably dusted. The butler ensures that existence runs no faster than it must. Each morning at precisely ten past nine he winds the clocks, beginning with the one in the hall whose pendulum swings like a heartbeat too punctual to be healthy. Should a clock ever stop, the house waits politely for it to resume—as do the residents, which is to say, forever.

There is no plot to speak of—plots are vulgar things—but there are protocols. A duchess without a duchy presides at the breakfast table, reading newspapers that have not yet been printed. A footman sets down teacups hovering slightly ahead of the saucers, the result of minor

scheduling errors between quantum tealeaves. Servants dust the library shelves only on alternate days because, if they did it daily, the books would notice and start reproducing. “We’re an old household,” they say, which explains nothing.

The ducks outside have their own routines. They occupy the ornamental pond in strict hierarchy: the eldest drake circles clockwise (stable government), the younger counter-clockwise (loyal opposition), and the ducklings engage in bipartisan bread collection. Nobody recalls who feeds them, though occasionally the bread appears toasted. No one remarks upon this either. Stability, here, is an act of collective good manners.

It seldom rains at the house itself—weather, like death, requires too much coordination—but it is always raining nearby. Sometimes, through the upstairs windows, one can see showers falling upon adjacent centuries, which is very pretty in a melancholy kind of way. The gardeners, noble souls, trim reality back to symmetry. They say it keeps the afternoons tidy.

The family within the house, whose names are all versions of each other, dine together mostly to maintain form. None of them recall who first leased the property, or from whom. Authority, here, has been reduced to etiquette: a phenomenon neither triumphant nor impotent, merely procedural. No one commands, no one disobeys; it’s all terribly British.

As for life in the house, it proceeds by consensus and faint apology. When someone dies—an uncle, usually—they simply continue turning up, occupying the same chair, and complaining of the noise from eternity. It would be awkward to contradict them; besides, the help still lays their places at dinner. Death, everyone agrees, is not the end so much as an extended administrative recess.

Now and then, the butler opens the front door and peers out at the world beyond the gates—not from curiosity, but from inventory. The landscape rearranges itself modestly, as if caught in an unlicensed expression. Somewhere there is a city, somewhere a monarch deciding something decisive; yet the house remains its own kingdom, passing decrees only about the placement of furniture.

The reader—yes, you—might at this moment imagine that there must be a meaning, but you would be mistaken. Meaning is not stored on the premises. It was misplaced during the Great Reclassification of Ontological Concepts, which followed the Invented War and preceded tea. Still, the staff carry on as if things mattered, for habits have more authority here than truth.

And speaking of tea: the hinge of afternoon arrives in its appointed fashion. Someone remarks—quite offhand—that the tea has gone cold.

At first reading, it's nothing; at second, everything. The remark appears daily, though no one recalls who spoke it first. The cup, when inspected, is always full again, steam and all, as if time had apologised. It is about this point that most observers suspect the house itself may be alive or, failing that, performing a convincing imitation.

Within each repetition of the day, matters are rearranged minutely: a chair an inch to the left, a reflection blinking before its owner, the ducks politely swapping directions as ministries do. The effect is comforting, though one suspects the comfort is mutual deception. Life persists because bureaucracy dislikes closure; death loiters because closure demands forms in triplicate.

If one wished to leave the house, one would find the front door leading only into smaller versions of the same front hall. Beyond the last door, inevitably, lies the trunk. And inside that trunk—for I have, with the criminal curiosity that once served me in London, peered within—there is the house again, perfectly complete, the same dust motes dancing like paperwork reconsidered.

So the cycle continues: house within house, duck within pond, file within drawer. Nothing ends, only shuffles. Authority here is a matter of tone, existence a matter of filing. Every act repeats with diminishing conviction until politeness becomes the only real law.

And perhaps that is eternity's secret: stability achieved by constant re-administration. There are worse fates than to spend forever having one's tea perpetually reheated.

In conclusion—though conclusions are discouraged—the journey from life to death remains largely a question of clerical endurance. Provided the paperwork never quite balances, the universe continues to exist out of professional embarrassment.

And outside, on the ornamental pond, the oldest duck turns slowly toward the youngest, as if about to announce something of cosmic import. But it is only the weather, arriving on time for once. The drizzle folds itself politely across eternity, and the butler notes, with satisfaction, that the tea, once again, is going cold.

2175: A Brief Preliminary Treatise (Pending Clarity)
on the Cosmic Universality of The Little
Book of Fitzartur Foibles

*by the Department of Transcendental Meta-Narratology,
Mallard Universarium*

It was agreed—by an unusually unanimous faculty vote, which naturally caused some alarm—that the Department must at last publish

an official position on the so-called Little Book of Fitzartur Foibles. This decision was made at 3:17 a.m., or 3:19 depending on which timeline one subscribes to (and several of us do, for academic diversity). Someone had just opened the Book during the faculty soirée, and by the time the Dean sobered up enough to quote himself, the building had developed recursion.

We therefore convened in Seminar Room 7B (rotated at a pleasing forty-five degrees to regular spacetime) to review our findings, though it should be noted that any attempt to review the Book leads inevitably to being reviewed by it instead.

Opening Remarks (Before the Room Became Circular)

The Little Book of Fitzartur Foibles needs no introduction, which is fortunate, as every introduction written for it has subsequently turned into a limerick about entropy. Its existence has been noted throughout history, pre-history, post-history, and what one colleague termed “that in-between bit when causality went on sabbatical.” Copies have been found—or have found us—in Sumerian temples, Martian archives, and the glove compartment of a 1987 Ford Fiesta hovering inexplicably above Lake Winnipeg.

Every civilisation that’s encountered the Book has concluded three things:

1. It contains every mythology known or as-yet-to-be-invented.
2. Its pages rearrange themselves according to the reader’s mood, diet, and planetary magnetic orientation.
3. It refuses quite stubbornly to end.

In its present state (which may already have changed by publication of this sentence), it takes the form of what librarians call a “Möbius Sphere”. For non-specialists, this is an object which has one side, one edge, and the undying urge to contradict topologists. The text curls through itself so that the act of reading constitutes a small yet spiritually meaningful form of travel.

The Nature of Research Difficulties

Scholarly engagement with the Book might be described as “ongoing,” although “perpetually resetting” is more accurate. Every time a member of faculty opens the volume, the universe makes a faint noise like the turning of an enormous page, and our computers reboot with new operating systems. Since last Tuesday, the Department’s email signature has evolved into haiku.

Dr. Persimmon of Comparative Mythotronics swears he once read within its pages the Epic of Gilgamesh, only subtitled “A Romantic Comedy of Errors”. Another colleague insists she has found, between

chapters twenty-three and thirty-one (which appears only on leap days), the tale of a post-industrial Prometheus who stole firewalls instead of fire and was punished by having his passwords eternally reset.

At least one graduate student disappeared entirely into the Book's binding last term, leaving only an abstract, three citations, and a faint smell of cinnamon. We now oversee his tenure from the inside, which has simplified scheduling significantly.

On the Structure of the Infinite Narrative

Attempts to measure the Book's mass, volume, or calorie content lead inevitably back to Newtonian poetry. It appears both boundless and contained, infinitely large when viewed side-on but small enough to rest on one's lap if one has the correct metaphysical posture.

Each reading rearranges the myths as though they are speaking to one another across time. When Dr. Zanthor opened it to page ∞ , Beowulf was having tea with Scheherazade while Loki heckled from the margins. Moments later the pages turned themselves, and the same story appeared again, but this time Luke Skywalker was arguing with an early Mesopotamian water god over royalties.

The consensus (provisional as always) is that the Book acts as a kind of narrative nervous system for the cosmos. Stories move through it the way electricity moves through nervous faculty meetings: occasionally in sparks, mostly by accident.

Applications and Unexpected Side Effects

Since the Department's formation, grant committees have repeatedly asked what practical benefits can come from studying an artefact that refuses to behave, let alone produce citations. Our standard reply—"existential reassurance"—has yet to secure adequate funding.

However, we have documented some side effects worth remarking upon. After extensive exposure to the Book, several staff began speaking exclusively in parables. The janitorial golems developed religious tendencies and refuse to tidy the Book's display case, claiming divine copyright. Even the campus pigeons have begun nesting in Möbius patterns, which has complicated spatial geometry and custodial schedules alike.

On the Question of Authorship

The author—or one might say the authorial principle—of Fitzartur Foibles remains unidentified. The name "Fitzartur" appears to derive from an Anglo-Norman root meaning "son of art," which is either profoundly symbolic or a cosmic pun. Various hypotheses exist: that the Book wrote itself; that it is the final consciousness of a collapsed

star; or that it's the universe's way of killing time while waiting for intelligent life to improve.

We have, on occasion, used divination by footnote (a method involving bibliographies read counterclockwise) to contact whatever intelligence dwells within. It replied—through a change in font size—that it preferred not to be peer-reviewed, citing “creative differences with linear causality.”

Preliminary Conclusion (Subject to Revision, Reincarnation, and Typographical Error)

After two centuries of research, the Department of Transcendental Meta-Narratology can confirm with moderate uncertainty that *The Little Book of Fitzartur Foibles* is both fiction and function, a library about itself, a paradox with binding. It may be the echo of Creation's first story told back into the void, a cosmic diary kept by language before words realised they needed readers.

To open it is to invite every myth that ever lived or meant to, and to close it is to suspect that you have become one.

Our current working model describes the Book as a conversation the universe is having with its own imagination. When you read it, the universe listens politely, waiting for you to say something interesting before continuing the plot elsewhere.

The committee will issue a longer report when minutes can again be kept in sequential order. Until then, all faculty are reminded that opening the Book after midnight constitutes an act of narrative summoning, and anyone who hears laughter echoing from the non-fiction wing should, as always, leave the building quietly and backwards.

In summary—subject to next week's findings and fiscal adjustments—the Department concludes that *The Little Book of Fitzartur Foibles* contains everything, including us, arguing fruitlessly over the footnotes.

And somewhere, beyond metaphor and the Vice-Chancellor's understanding, the Book turns another page.