The Wolf of Whindale

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The Wolf of Whindale

A Tale of Northalbion

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The Wolf of Whindale

For Jeff

O, ye immortal gods! what is theogony?
O, thou too, mortal man! what is philanthropy?
O, world! which was and is, what is cosmogony?
Some people have accused me of misanthropy;
And yet I know no more than the mahogany
That forms this desk, of what they mean; *lykanthropy*
I comprehend; for, without transformation
Men become wolves on any slight occasion.

Byron, *Don Juan*, Canto IX

If I forget thee, O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget her cunning.

Psalm 137:5

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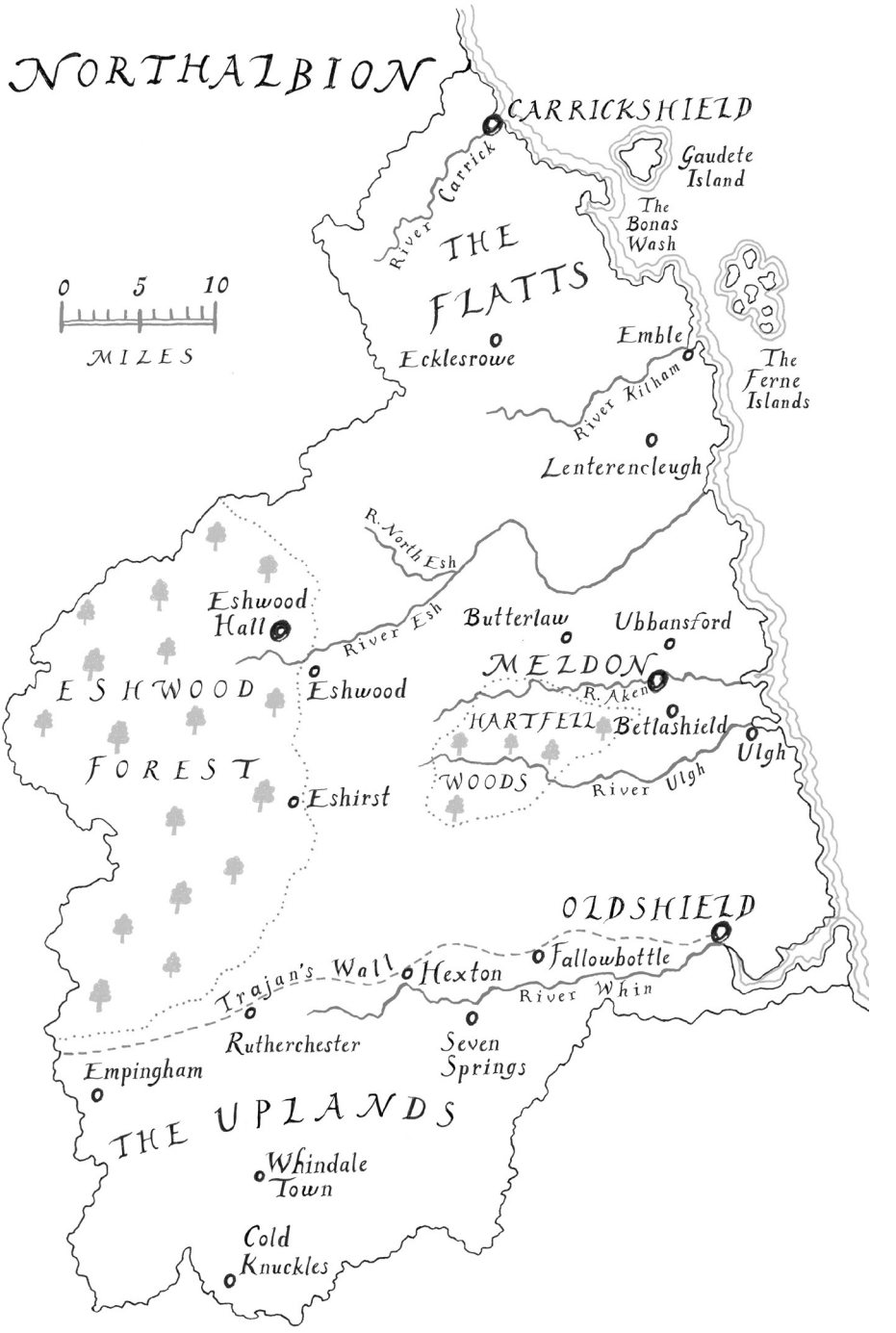
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Prologue

an extract from a lecture,
'Mithras Sol Invictus: Mysteries Old and New',
delivered by Dr Erasmus Wintergreen at the Hermetic
Philosophy Library, Oldshield, 18 December 1916

Ladies and gentlemen, I was honoured to be asked here this evening to speak to you all about the mythology and folklore peculiar to Northalbion, and I was delighted when the librarian, Mr Thorne, asked if I might pay especial attention to the lore pertaining to Mithras, the Roman sun-god who was once – long ago, and not since the fourth century, so we have been told – worshipped here, in dedicated temples all along Trajan's Wall. I accepted Mr Thorne's invitation with eagerness and gratitude, and that I encountered a most unexpected difficulty in obliging him is no fault of his. But I am running ahead of myself, so let me begin by introducing our subject.

By the time the cult of Mithras took root in Northalbion, the Roman Empire had spread over much of the known

world, from the Nile to the Rhine, from the Black Sea to the ground on which we meet today. As usual, the Romans had set about syncretically absorbing the gods of the local population into their own capacious system, and this is how they came to know of an entity that had inhabited the region known as Northalbion for as long as anyone remembered. What the local population called it has not been recorded, but the Romans called it Mithras, borrowing the name of a Persian god, 𐬨𐬀𐬎𐬭 – 'Mitra'. Now, in the Avestan dialect of Old Iranian, 𐬨𐬀𐬎𐬭 means contract, agreement, treaty, oath, bargain. Terms would be agreed by shaking hands and swearing on Mitra's name. In one tradition, Mitra was Ba'al's twin brother, and just as Ba'al was the god of darkness and secrets, Mitra was sunlight and truth. The Roman Mithras, it was to be hoped, would retain the qualities associated with the good brother. But twins can be so difficult to tell apart! One twin may even pose as the other, if they have a mind to . . .

In any case, the Romans manufactured new rituals to worship this entity. Now, ladies and gentlemen, in my experience supernatural beings are rather like stray cats: so long as you keep feeding them, they will keep coming back. Soon enough, the entity answered to the name Mithras, or Sol Invictus Mithras, or variants thereof – though, as I say, none of these were its true name. The Romans declared the entity to be a mediator of the divine, sidereal and earthly realms, as well as a god of the intellect, and much else besides. They described it as having a body like a lion, wings like a bat and the face of a beautiful young man.

They depicted it standing, with its right hand raised and its left hand lowered, for its first lesson was the first lesson of all occult systems: *as above, so below*. Mithras, they said, had one hand in the divine realm and one hand in the earthly realm. Mithras, they said, was the one who had shaken hands with the sun – and, like the sun, he saw all things and knew all things. Indeed, his followers believed that the sun had knelt before him, hence his title Sol Invictus. Mithras was the one who spun the great wheel of the zodiac.

But I find myself in a rather awkward position today, for I fear I have come here under a false pretence. When our illustrious librarian, Mr Thorne, so kindly invited me, it was to speak to you all about the mythology associated with Mithras – and yet it has come to my attention that Mithraic worship is not, in actuality, a matter of *mythology* or *folklore* at all. Rather, it is a matter of *religion*. You see, as I plan to demonstrate, Mithras has, in living memory, retained at least some of his worshippers. And, for all I know, he has them yet . . .

I

At Whindale Top

1845

Mr Playfair was dead – his body, found two days afore, had been torn to rags, the head separated from the trunk, ripped right off, and placed on Windy Top, keeping toot, high on the law, a lookout all compassed about with his hands and his feet and his guts. The state of it, the sheer violence of it, led some folk to put two and two together. Even then but, there were others who said no, there was no such thing as the Whindale Wolf. Even then but, there were others who said aye, there *was* such a thing indeed, but that it had never been known to attack a person – as far as anybody knew or could remember, it had only et a sheep chancetimes; and, that being the case, a body – that is, a human body – had maybes killed Mr Playfair and made it *look* like the work of the wolf, with the turning of him inside-out almost, and the rending of his various parts.

Mr Playfair, or what was left of him, had been found by Stephen Myerscough while he was rounding up the sheep he had grazing on the law. He'd run to Whindale and told the parish constable, who, since he had experience in catching rats but none in catching murderers, sent for a constable from Oldshield. Word got round fast – but, still, we'd not have heard tell of Playfair's body being found if it hadn't been for Mr Jobsworth. By day, you see, we'd be at work down the mine, and by night we'd be sleeping in our lodging shop, ten miles south-west over the moors from Whindale Town. We mostly never saw a soul but each other from Monday morning to Saturday afternoon, when we'd head back home to our villages. But the night afore, Mr Jobsworth, who was the consulting engineer for the Whindale Mining Company, had stopped by the lodging shop for to give us the news. So we learned why Playfair hadn't turned up for work all week. Now we were back underground, but were getting nigh-on nowt done, for all we could think of was our old marra.

It was a terrible crime if murder it was, for Mr Playfair had a young boy of three – a bairn, really – young Thomas, and he'd be an orphan now, for his mam had died birthing him; and, besides that, Playfair was a well-liked man. Even I liked him, when it came to it. He was our steward, so to speak: our foreman in matters of combination, which is what you'd call union affairs, and his name was John Plover. I just called him Mr Playfair. And, while I'm at it, I should say, the consulting engineer's name was James Dobsworth. I just called him Mr Jobsworth.

My name's Caleb Malarkey. People have called me all manner of things.

There was six of us in our partnership, working this particular twenty-five-fathom stretch of the vein, and we usually worked in pairs: I was paired with Jack Roebuck (whom I called Mr Crow, because of the sound of his name, and also because of his jet black hair and beard: indeed, he was as hairy a fellow as ever I'd seen); and then George Henry (to whom I bequeathed no nickname) was paired with Zekiel Evans (whom I called Heavens-Evans, on account of his being such a staunch Primitive Methodist); and Mr Plover had been partnered with Lemuel Moughtin (whom I called Mr Muffin).

That day, as ever, we were at work, sixty fathoms deep, digging by candlelight. You cannot do that in a coal mine for the firedamp, but the fumes in a lead-mine are of a different nature and don't ignite, though they do for your lungs in the end. When I say fumes, I don't just mean the stench of tallow and the reek of the thunder-box, though that was bad enough – I also mean the dust, for it's five to one a lead-miner's apt to die of dust or the consumption afore he dies by accident or owt else. Still though but, it was pleasant and creaturely, much of the time, to be down there like a brock in his sett, or like rabbits in a warren, with the sobbing, flickering candle flames glistering off the spar so the walls seemed speckled with crumbs of light, all a-twinkle.

We were tight in our pairs, and in our partnership, and you might even say that we were tight with the agents and

engineers and mine owners, for we shared a common dream: all the while we were digging, we were dreaming, you see, dreaming that we'd be lucky and fall in with rich ore. If that were to happen, we'd all be the richer for it, not just the mine owner, whoever that happened to be at the time, for our wages were tied to the value of the ore we dug. That was our bargain. We shared in the gamble, and we'd share in the rewards – or the misfortune, according to happenstance. But to work like that at keeping up a dream takes a toll on you. It breeds uncertainty and suspicion. The way we'd speak of the vein was testimony to this:

'She's frightened to climb yon hill, I tell you, and swins away to the sun side!'

'Aye, deek at how she throws the north cheek up!'

To hear us on, you'd think we were engaged in capturing a wily beast, or guessing at a lover's caprice, or rationalising the interventions of a moody god. The lead was like a force – a living thing, that is to say – and we'd call our waterfalls and waterways forces, too. We worked at the mercy of these forces, for we used waterwheels in our trade, so a drought could mean weeks off work, and torrential rain was just as bad. The water would 'quit us out', we'd say. But, really, everyone lives in a world of forces, regardless of whether they care to name them.

The grove – for that's what we'd tend to call a lead-mine, a grove – was on the eastern flank of Windy Top. All of this is by the by, but, still, you should know it, so I'll get you told afore I forget: a vein of lead runs vertical like a fluted curtain – as opposed to coal, which puddles horizontal – and

this lead curtain is bottomless or, at the least, it's deeper than man can delve. She was a strong vein at Windy Top, running east and west. Against her north cheek was a soft dowk, partly shivery, and fornenst it a cawk or spar about a yard wide, joined on the south by a strong rider three or four yards wide, the southernmost portion being mostly pearl spar or calc spar, in which lay ribs of ore four or five or six inches across. Sometimes, instead of being ribbed, the spar was flowered with ore, and all mixed up in the matrix of the vein there'd be zinc blende, copper and iron pyrites, and various species of what-have-you. And here and there the vein would form a sort of flat, and the pearl spar would flutter in amongst the riders towards the north cheek. She was bonny to look at.

At four-and-twenty, I was the youngest of us; hardly a bairn, you may say – but sometimes it matters that all your peers are your elders, as it can be like being the last-born of many brothers, which is to say it's a condition you never altogether escape, howsoever long you live. To make the matter more apparent, it was the style then for a fellow to have long moustaches, and I could never grow mine. I affected a disdain for the fashion, which didn't fool anybody. As George Henry liked to say, I still had my milk face. Anyway, a man's youth is a strange quality that dies hard, and is apt to throw off freaks and flukes and sports long after it should have said its say. So it was with me, in any case, and in consequence I cannot speak with complete authority regarding my choices back then, for I was all but a different man entirely, having so little to regret and so much to dream

of doing; whereas today those categories are transposed. And I can give you, besides that, another reason not to wholly believe what I have to tell you: to be young is often to be bored – you've no time for it later – and to be bored is to be capricious. Many's the choice I made for really no better reason than I was eager to see whether I could set an action in motion, or upset a thing from progressing in its natural course. It seems to me now that there was often no more accountability in my behaviour than that of a kitten left alone with a ball of wool. Though, had you asked me at the time, I'd have given you, no doubt, all manner of hifalutin reasonings.

Anyways, I was young, and many around me were doing their best to tolerate it. Principally there was my mam and my sister, Mary, whom I called Mop. Now, I've no memory of what Mam was like afore Dad, as Mam put it, 'buggered off back to Ireland', but I think she must have been very different – less severe in her religion anyway, for by the time I got to know her she was as good and bitter a churchwoman as you could hope to meet. Even as a child, it seemed to me that she'd tied all the loose ends Dad left behind to the church, so, if you followed any one of the threads of her life for any distance, you'd find yourself back there afore you knew it. When I was a bairn I had no choice but to get caught up in it, singing the hymns with all my might and crying myself to sleep with fears of my imaginary sinfulness, but as I got older the hellfire burnt out, and I began to suspect I'd been fed on ashes, and my childish heart deceived.

Mop was different, or – no: by the time of our story

she was as like Mam as a pea's like a pea, but at one time she could have been different. Yes, things could have been different for Mop. I mind how, as a child, she had a passion for pear drops, and to this day the smell of a sweetie shop brings her back to me, as she was when me and her was thick as thieves. I made it a policy always to keep a poke of pear drops handy, so as to be sure to have something to bribe her with if the need suddenly arose. I hid them in the cavity of the tall clock, which seems a very obvious hidey-hole now that I think of it, but she never jealoused them. When Mam was raging at the wicked world and at Dad for having buggered off, and Mop was in mortal need of a treat, I'd tap her on the shoulder and say 'Look what I found . . .' and so things wouldn't seem as bad for a spell. But I suppose there's only so long you can hold the world at bay that way, and when she got to be twelve years old or so, she took a turn. She disdained fancy-work, and read nowt but the Bible. More and more, she would keep to herself, or cleave to Mam, and she put away childish things and wouldn't play at marbles or jack-ball. In short, she came out against both pear drops and me, saying that I was tempting her, and that she would be good and reject them forthwith, for they were worldly things, and had a fulsome, vulgar smell, and so on and so forth, until I knew that she'd gone down the selfsame path as Mam, and had tied herself to the selfsame church, which only made me detest it all the more. As a consequence of Dad's having buggered off, I was stuck supporting them – and they were stuck being supported by me, for the only work they were qualified to do was pick

stones out of rich men's land, which was hard labour and paid a pittance. In short, we were each other's gaolers and each other's prisoners, and there was no end to it in sight.

'What's the difference atween a wolf and a dog anyway?' someone asked, of no one in particular, back in the gloom of the grove. We'd been thinking of Mr Playfair all the while. For weeks now, the Whindale Wolf had slunk and skulked in the peripherals of our waking thoughts, but now it was front and centre. Mr Crow took it upon himself to frame an answer, for he fancied himself a natural philosopher.

'Well, first, there's the size, of course. This isn't such a great difference, speaking in general, but our particular wolf appears to be a creature of unusual proportions, a freak of nature. Mr Plover was no small man. Also, I'm told that the bite marks that our wolf leaves on the sheep it kills are bigger than those of any dog. So there's that: there's the size difference. And you cannot tame a wolf, neither: that's the second great difference. A dog likes to be trained, to know his place in the order of things, but with a wolf, the training won't take, and you'll never can trust him . . .'

We let Mr Crow blether on for a bit, for it was pleasant to have a body to listen to while we worked, if there wasn't a song being passed about, as often enough there was – though on no account is whistling allowed down a mine of any sort; it is with miners as it is with seamen, and for as mysterious a reason. Anyways, eventually, George Henry, who was an umbrageous and polrumptious sort, put it to Mr Crow that, for all his flannel, he knew no more about wolves than the rest of us, whereupon Crow fell to scratching his great

black beard, as he did whenever he was put to the blush. Over bait we talked it out in the round, and this proved to be more effectual than any one of our attempts to speak authoritatively.

When was the last wolf killed and caught in England? According to Mr Muffin, it had been hunted down by Prince Edgar in fifteen-hundred-and-something-or-other, but there had been wolves in Scotland and in Ireland as recently as eighty years since, and Scotland was as nigh as damn-it, so owt was possible. Anyways, Heavens-Evans said, it was widely understood that the lonelier parts of Wales yet teemed with the beasts.

Wasn't there an English king killed by the wolves he was a-hunting? There was indeed: Bad King Memprys – and, though we couldn't agree on the year, we were sure it must have happened in January, which was of old called the wolf month, this being when the creatures were especially hungry and cruel. And hadn't Bad King Memprys come back from the dead, as a wolf? No, someone said, that was Bad King John, who had in life brought famine to the people.

We pooled a number of proverbs into the bargain: I repeated the old farmers' saying, 'Better a wolf in the field than a fair February.' 'Life to the wolf is death to the lamb,' said Mr Crow. And even Heavens-Evans made a contribution, somewhat reluctantly though but, for he didn't much want to encourage the discussion, 'Speak of the wolf and his tail appears, or so I have heard it bruited among the vulgar.' Mr Crow was minded of an old ballad, from the days of the reivers, which ran thus:

They spairit neither man nor wyfe,
Young or old of mankind that bare lyfe,
Like wilde wolfis in furiositie,
Baith brint and slewe with greate crueltie . . .

I thought this a very barbarous lay, and said so, and Heavens-Evans agreed, until I made plain that I spoke in reference to its rough numbers and not to its subject matter, which I entirely approved of. George Henry made no contribution, except to say that listing proverbs was a foolish enterprise, to which I could not resist replying '*lupus non timet canem latrantem*.'

All the while we worked, we'd be hearing the great wheel turn. It was an enormous thing, buried deep in the grove, a wooden wheel maybes twenty-five feet across, and, the whole time we were down there, it would be pulling down great tubs of water from on bank, and with the water came fresh air, and that's how we didn't suffocate from the chokedamp and the stithe. Wherever we happened to be, we'd hear the wheel going cluck-clunk, like the slow, steady heartbeat of the earth itself, sometimes up close and unignorable, sometimes faint and unthought of as the beat of our own pulses. It was a reassuring sound, and made a fellow feel less lonely down in the depths.

'What about you, Caleb?' says Mr Muffin to me on this particular day. 'You've been uncharacteristically quiet on the matter. Do you think Mr Plover was killed by the wolf?'

In truth, I was undecided on the matter, but since the talk was tending one way, I found myself arguing the other, as

was and is my wont. So I says no, there's no such thing as the Whindale Wolf.

I might have left it at that, but Mr Muffin keeps on. 'So, what, you reckon it was murder, is that it?'

I says I supposed so, and that such seemed likeliest, unless Mr Playfair had tripped over a toadstool while taking the long way home.

'Likeliest, eh? And who's the *likeliest* suspect in this case of murder, Caleb, oh ye who are so wise?'

I could see that Mr Muffin was goading me, but I have ever found annoyance to be conducive to fluency, so I found myself saying that the party with most to gain was none other than the mine owner.

'Dobsworth? You think James Dobsworth was up on the law at yon time o' night tearing Mr Plover to bits and pieces?' Now, here Mr Muffin was being obtuse. Mr Jobsworth was no more the mine owner than I was; he was merely the consulting engineer, and he'd drop by once a month to make sure we were behaving ourselves. Even the company didn't exactly *own* the mine; they held the lease of it from the bishop of the diocese, but it was ultimately the property of the Crown.

'I say nowt of the sort. I say only that, with a strike about to begin, the party with most to gain from the death of our foreman is surely the mine owner. And Mr Jobsworth is Brinsley Siskin's man now, if what I've heard is true. I don't suppose Master Siskin does his own dirty work, but he's set to gain most from this, all the same.' What I was getting at was how, while Playfair was kicking around, there had been

a chance of organising the men and us all combining with the one will, for Playfair had a way with him in such matters, though it pained me to admit it. I had, in fact, argued bitterly against the strike. He and I had rarely seen eye to eye, but now he was dead and the rest of us were in a new dispensation, like unto so many lost sheep, and we'd have to wait for the fog to clear and then see where we stood. We were going on strike because there'd been a move to change the bargain and put us all on fixed hours per week, and Playfair had persuaded us that our current state of affairs, in which we all shared in the dream together, kept the various parties from being conspicuously dishonest, in that anyone who tried to run a concern on skinflint principles would likely have no more success than he deserved.

'So once again you reckon yourself best informed, eh, Caleb? And what are the rest of us doing? Casting about in the dark?'

Mr Muffin was trying to wind me up, and I considered pointing out that casting about in the dark was very precisely what we were doing, but no, I let that cup pass and merely said, 'If fools went not to market, bad wares would never get sold, and then what?'

Mr Muffin had been behaving queerly all day. He was practically idle, not having his second, Mr Playfair, to work with. If you were digging shale you could work alone with a poll-pick, but with limestone you had to work in pairs, you see: one of you would hold a picker against the rock face, balancing it on your shoulder, and your workmate would whack the back of it with a hammer. And this was done by

candlelight, so the back-man needed to have a good aim, and the foremost man needed to be the trusting sort. You gave the picker a twist just as it was struck, and that stopped it from getting jammed. Sometimes this split the rock clean away; at other times, you'd use this method to drill into the rock, after which you'd use a sort of long spoon to scrape out the hole, then you'd poke in some black powder wrapped in paper, and bung it with some thill and shale. Then you'd poke a tiny hole through to the black powder to lay your fuse. After that, you lit the fuse and scarpered, crying 'Put nowt down!', which was the warning signal. When a miner heard those words, he knew to stay stock still and look sharp, for a blast was on the way.

Anyway, Muffin was idle now, without Playfair. He'd nowt but time to loaf and offer his opinion on sundry matters. Maybes Muffin was upset at the loss of his marra, or maybes there was an absence where Playfair had once been, and Muffin was looking to fill it. I got to thinking how this was like a goaf, which is what we'd call the cavity left behind once we'd excavated a portion of the vein. A goaf was a big empty space, all held up with props and such, and it was apt to fill with water or else be filled more dramatically by gravity, collapsing under its own weight. I muttered 'Muffin's a goaf, Muffin's a goaf,' and had a bit giggle to think that these words had likely never been uttered together afore.

Mr Crow changed the subject then, and said that the answer was surely to buy some land of our own and to make sure aforehand it had the sugar under it. (That's what we called it: the sugar. I should have got you told that. Only

them that's never dug for it call it lead. It's the same with coal: a pitman won't call it such, for he'll want to specify what variety of coal he's on about – band or brat, swad or dant, cannel or claggy, crow or parrot, and so forth. If he has to refer generally to the thing itself, he's apt to call it black diamonds.) Mr Crow recollected how his grandfather, Old Roebuck, had been able to find the sugar by means of a hazel rod, which, when he held it just so, balanced twixt finger and thumb, would twitch in the general direction of lead, for he had the gift.

The doctrine of *Virgula Divina*, to give it its grander airs, was largely disbelieved by our times, and Heavens-Evans was quick to say that such superstitions had no place in the life of a Christian.

George Henry scoffed at that, and said that if it truly pointed to where the sugar was, we'd every one of us be at it, Christian or no.

Crow said it was academical in any case, as his dad had also tried his hand at the hazel rod trick but never had any luck, so the gift was not a birthright, evidently.

This led to much talk of fathers, as often happened in our line of work, for you'd naturally follow your dad in whatsoever specialism he had. Only a fool would have asked a fellow why he'd decided to become, say, an enginewright: he'd've done so because his dad had been one, or else he'd been a wheelwright or some such related thing. Not having a dad, I held my tongue and let them blether.

When Dad buggered off back to Ireland, he left nowt behind but his shelf of books, and my abiding image of the man is

of him sitting in his chair, which subsequently became my chair, reading in one of his books, all of which subsequently became my books. This was my treasure, and unlike the items a more usual child might revere, as of an abacus or a doll or conkers, it was precious indeed. Dad had me and Mop reading so soon as we were able, and it became a lifelong habit with me, and even now, whenever I hear a new word, I find that it sticks to me the way a burr sticks to a badger's arse, until, still a bairn, I fairly bristled with the things.

I'd be doing much of this reading on the sly, for Mam was a creature of flinty stricture and rigidity of habit, and she mistrusted free thinking of any variety. She might have loved me, I think, had I been born a dunce. Alas. Soon enough, I'd read through Dad's shelf, and had to return and exhaust it once again. Like Mr Montaigne, I might say that I'd a skipping wit when it came to the plodding occupation of books, and soon as one grew tedious I cast it aside and took up another; but in truth, though my appetite was precocious, I understood hardly a tenth of what my eyes passed over, as would have been evident had anyone enquired of my opinion, though none ever did. I was learning the words for things, you see, but not the things themselves. So it seems to me now.

At length, I became frustrated with this endless reading that seemed to avail so little, and so I began to develop a new, contrarian system of engagement, and it is to this I ascribe the growth of my mind. If I was feeling especially happy and zestful, I read from Mr Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy*; if I was glum and fixed on a particular complaint, some

of Mr Montaigne's essays would lift me and shake me; if I was feeling wrathful or prideful or lusty or fantastical, I read from Thomas Browne's Christian morals; if Mam succeeded in forcing me to read any of Mr Foxe's *Book of Martyrs*, I doused the flames of righteousness with the cool sense of Mr Hooker's *Ecclesiastical Polity*; and if I was ever bored, I turned to James Thomson's poetry, which was so monumentally dull that my everyday tedium seemed a cornucopia of incident in comparison. And always we read the Bible, and we also had books of hymns and sermons, as well as volumes of Shakespeare, Milton, Sterne, Godwin, Byron and others, and books by John Bunyan, of course, as every house has them, all of which I made sure to read, upon sound contrarian principles, whenever I felt least inclined to do so – and thus I conjured the spirit of contradiction that was and is the presiding genius of my life.

Now, maybes it happened because I was thinking on my dad and maybes it happened because it was due, but at this point I had a seizure. I should have got you told about that: I have seizures, now and then. It must be unsettling for them that's around me at the time, as I'm told that I look ghastly when it comes upon me: my face bloodless, and with my eyes var-nigh popping out my skull, and my mouth pulled in tight like a drawstring. Certainly, it's unsettling for *me*, because whenever I take a turn I have queer visions that I suppose are like dreams, but they feel more real than dreams. More real, I reckon, than reality itself.

In my vision, I was just working as usual, howking at some shale and clearing it out of the way, when along comes my

father, easy as you like, as if he'd just fancied stopping by to pass the time with me all the same. He was dressed well, in country velveteen and pilot coat, and looked to be about the same age as myself, though whether this meant he'd died at that age, and therefore his spirit had aged no further, or if it was simply because he must have been about that age when my infant eyes last apprehended him, I cannot say. We fell into talk like we were old friends and, though most of it is now past my recall, I remember wanting very much to tell him something, but failing to do so, which frustrated me, and when I tried to bring to mind what it was I should be saying, I could not do it, which annoyed me the more. My marras worked on and never minded our visitor. Next thing after that, he was leading me down tunnels I hadn't known were there, and we seemed to be descending ever deeper into the earth, until we were fathoms deep in the gloom, just the two of us, and then we came to a stop and I realised that we was now stood in a crypt, not a mine, and my father was ganging to and fro lighting the candles that were arranged about the place. Now my father was pointing to the inscription on the side of one of the tombs. He didn't move, only waited for me to respond to his direction. I crept forward and squinnied at the letters cut into the slate. I understood them to read *ex homine commutatus nuper in lupus*. I'd enough Latin to ken what that meant. I glanced up at my dad, who was looking very grim now. And then I looked back to see whose grave this was – and, when I read the name, I awoke with a great cry, whereupon this detail instantly vanished from my memory.

I came to to find Mr Crow watching over me. He'd always make me as comfortable as was possible in such a place.

'Is he still away with the fairies?' asked George Henry, looking at me with suspicion, as if I might be putting it on. He did this every time I took a turn. He ran on fixed lines, as a wagon-tub on its rails. Habitual anger will do this to a fellow. Mr Crow ignored him.

Mr Muffin was talking of Walter Corlett, who had worked at a grove up towards Rutherchester, and who had disappeared three months since. Nobody had thought owt about it at the time, for none of us knew Mr Corlett especially well, and his vanishing seemed not worth gaping at. It had been generally assumed that he'd struck off on a hunt for metals more precious than lead in foreign mines. So I'd adjudged the matter, anyway.

'But wasn't Mr Corlett an associate of Mr Plover?' asked Mr Crow.

Mr Muffin confirmed that he was an associate and, more than that, a friend. Corlett and Playfair had attended the lectures over in Hexton concerning political economy, and they'd shared all sorts of theories on these and related matters.

There was a bit of quiet after Muffin said this, as we each chewed it over: two friends, one disappeared and tother torn to bits, inside three months . . .

George Henry broke the silence, and to no more effect than was his wont. 'I think he went to the Sill, like as not, and if he left behind a green girl with a green gown, well, he wasn't the first.'

That's how we'd talk about it, the Sill. We'd say, 'Well, there's always the Sill.' Or, 'Next thing, you'll be off to the Sill.' Or, say, at a hasty wedding, some wiseacre might observe that it had been a coin toss between this and a career at the Sill . . . It was a name that filled out a proverb, and hardly seemed connected to an actual place. But it was a real place all the same though but, and real bodies had gone there to work and die. It was away off to the north-east, somewhere by Trajan's Wall, var-nigh in Scotland. As to what it was like there, we could but guess, for no man had ever come back to tell of it.

'They are the *residuum*,' George Henry had said, once, of the fellows who had vanished thus. Ever since he'd attended a lecture by Samuel Smiles, George Henry held that the poor were poor because of idleness, and, in short, that what a body got was an unfailing index of what a body deserved. I found it very amusing that a doctrine of industriousness should so promote idleness of the intellect, for, after George Henry had accepted Sir Smiles's one idea, it seemed he would never be required – or, eventually, be able – to entertain another.

Sill means trouble, Sill means trap. That was another of our proverbials. What we meant was that the metalliferous limestone in that region was understood to give way to an exposed bed of trap – which was our name for any dark stone that broke in pieces of a rhomboidal figure, and consequently exhibited steps like a staircase. In the case of the Sill, the trap-bed was whinstone, which we'd sometimes refer to as 'trouble', it being a hard, volcanic substance,

difficult to manage, and having queer properties: if it ran too close by a seam of coal, then it would turn the coal to coke, and so forth. Today, you'd call it dolerite, but back then we called it whinstone.

As for what was being mined at the Sill, nobody rightly knew, but it mustn't have been coal and it wasn't lead: no one had ever seen wagons coming or ganging out-by, and it was as far from a railway line as could be. Indeed, the Sill seemed to be a vast but entirely unproductive concern. Mind, this wasn't as strange as it might sound, for many's the grove that turned but little profit. Indeed, it seemed to us that those with money passed their leisure hours by buying up each other's debt, or else writing off a debt by handing over ownership of a mining concern, or else a body would get married and acquire a lead-mine and a debt into the bargain. It was all we could do to keep track of who the present owner was, and who we worked for.

Some thought they must be digging for jewels at the Sill, but the mineral field had never yielded owt more precious than a bit of silver all intermeddled with the lead – *argentiferous galena* to give it its scholarly name. You'd could only get at the silver if you knew the delivering process patented by Mr Pattinson, where you arrange nine iron pots and heat them, and then melt the ore in the middle pot, and then, as it cools, you skim off the lead into one set of pots and the silver into the tother. Eventually you've got your dab of silver all right, maybes two ounces of it in a ton of lead ore, but it's hardly worth the faff. It wasn't *wageable*, we'd say. Other folk believed that those at the Sill were simply digging in search

of a new seam of lead, but they hadn't found it yet and so they dug on, and so it had been for decades. I found it hard to credit this idea – a mine owner like a gambler on a losing streak who refuses to cut his losses! – but I would live and learn more about the strange ways of wealthy folk.

Mr Muffin chirps up now, and says it might be that the wolf has claimed more victims than we realise. Mr Plover, Mr Corlett . . . and who knew when the beast found a taste for human flesh?

The illogic of it all overwhelmed me, and, though still light-headed from my seizure, I sat up and found myself holding forth on how the deaths of two such fellows, both leaders of combinations of miners, was an almighty coincidence, and that this wolf's palate was certainly a dainty one in preferring flavours that secured the interests of the status quo.

Nobody said owt for a moment or two, and it seemed a relief when Mr Crow said, 'Plover's death is a blow to us, but, I tell you, it's a worse blow to his laddie, Thomas. That's both of his parents in the bosom of the Lord. When he grows up, he'll inherit his father's name and his father's debt and nowt but.'

And someone says 'Debt? How's that?' And Mr Crow says Playfair had died owing thirteen pound in back-rent.

'And him the gaffer!' says George Henry, laughing, as he did when he was up a height or disgusted. 'This is no kind of work. Mark my words, the criminals have it easier, I swear to Christ they do. The criminals in Botany Bay are laughing at us, even now. They're pissing their moleskins

laughing at the thought of us cavilled here picking for sugar in a frigid hill!'

And then Mr Crow, who was forever singing or – when we were above ground – whistling some tune or other, took up the ballad that had been doing the rounds.

Had I my time to live again
Had I my soul to save
I'd never see Van Diemen's land
Nor sail the ocean's wave:
I'd rather kill a judge and swing
Upon the gallows high
Than live to be a convict here
And here a convict die!

We sang it through and around again. *We toil in chains and die in shame and fill forgotten graves*.

And then Heavens-Evans says, 'What's to become of young Thomas Plover, then but?'

'There's nobody but Plover's mam left to raise him, and she's on the way out. She's as thin as a sheet. Next winter will see her in the churchyard, you mind.'

'And once that happens, Poor Thomas will be carted off to the orphanage,' says I.

'They're like to set him on as a washer-boy soon enough, are they not?' says Mr Crow, to which George Henry says darkly,

'He'd be better looked after down here in the bowels of the earth with the likes of us.'

There were murmurs of agreement all round at this, for we all knew a washer-boy had a hard life, whether he was hotching his chats or shaddering ore on the knockstone, all under the eye – and under the heavy stick – of the Washing Master, whose jacket was white but whose heart was as hard and as black as the bowler hat on his head. It was a rough cavil, to be a washer-boy.

'It's Master Siskin who owns that orphanage, is it not?' says Heavens-Evans.

I says aye, it was indeed, and that fate was a mistress with a cruel sense of humour, and when she found a poor man with a plan, the old bitch licked her teeth.

Heavens-Evans misliked such dark murmurings, and said I'd no grounds to say such things. Mr Plover, he reckoned, had died of natural causes, like as not, and then after that the buzzards and the foxes and what-have-you would have been at him, making everything look worse than really it was.

And so you see, even then but, there were some like me who said no, there was no such thing as the Whindale Wolf.

2
The Combination

So that was Friday – and we had agreed to strike on the Monday. This had been Mr Playfair's initiative. He said that the mine owner was changing the bargain by asking us to agree to work to fixed-hour shifts per week. This, Playfair had contended, was no halfpenny matter. We'd always worked our own bargain and set our own shifts till then, you see, and we'd usually work every hour we could anyway, but we were free to change our plans, if it came to it, and work less one day and more the next or what-have-you. Playfair's point was that the mine owner had no right to make us give our word to do what we were already doing in good faith, as it amounted to giving away our word altogether. We were all dreaming together, and it was in everybody's interests to work and to find the sugar. If it was there, then we'd look sharp and find it, and we'd all be the richer for it; and if it wasn't, then what advantage was it to have