

Introduction

by

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THERE IS SOMETHING peculiar to the atmosphere of old England which produces masters of fantasy. Perhaps it is the century upon century of history and legend sprouting, maturing, buried again in its soil to nurture yet more wonders to come.

Pict and Celt, Roman and Saxon, Dane and Norman, all have ruled here in their time, each leaving a residue of old custom and belief to haunt certain once sacred places, or merely shadow a few minds among their far descendants. So rich a heritage can not deny some treasure to the mining of any researcher.

Masters of fantasy work their magic by two methods. Either they may create in painstaking and loving detail another world, perhaps adjacent to this time and space for the visiting of modern mortals. Or they allow to impinge upon our own unearthly and supernatural influences.

Tolkien's incomparable Middle Earth, C. S. Lewis's Narnia are the outstanding examples of the first, but Alan Garner has chosen the second road.

His Alderley Edge is very much a part of the modern England. One may obtain a small official guide for a ninepence and scan prosaic photographs of house and hill, road and copse, the same territory he has made into a battlefield for vast and uncanny forces.

To introduce his tale he springboards into action with a well known local legend. But it is not the reality of an

author's material which counts greatly, it is the use made of it.

Ancient copper mines lie under the Edge, dating back into the Neolithic Age, well worked by men who later forged bronze swords to hold their land. But when Garner chooses to imprison his characters temporarily therein, he evokes such a fear of forgotten ways underground as will linger long in his readers' memories.

On the surface life runs smoothly in the placid countryside he vividly brings to life. But just underneath, ah, what ancient powers and forces for good and ill stir uneasily, awaiting a small change in things-as-they-are to spring to action after centuries of sullen slumber.

Names ring throughout as might the harsh notes of Herne's Horn—the Huldrafolk, the Svartmort (I defy any writer to find a better one for these squat villains), the Stromkarl, Gaberlunzie, Shuttlingslow—the very repeating of them fires the imagination. Older than Christianity, far divorced from our times are such! We have our own devils, but they are far less such majestic troublings. Yet long ago our ancestors' flesh crept to the whispering of such names or their like, and we can accept their awakening in a night divided between moon and shadow, sometimes too much in favor of the dark.

Choosing to call upon Pictish and Nordic-British legendary material as he does, Alan Garner has written, not a juvenile as this book was first judged, but a story which will evoke a quick response from all those who are moved by strange and far off things.

Once wolves did pace just beyond the edge of the fire light, and all terrors slithered through the dark. Once talismans given by gods or powers armed heroes and made weak men the conquerors of supernatural wickedness. Some of us yearn to see a Stromkarl's prophecies fulfilled. And all honor to such a singer of saga-tale who can make it come so alive on pages between book covers!