

Triolet : In Arden

In Which three incidents are recounted, with only minimal reference to context

When I was sent to Stowe Head, I thought I'd left Esh Arvid behind me.

I was wrong, although I didn't find out for over a month, and even then I wasn't sure at first.

I suppose there might have been earlier glimpses, but nothing on which I could put my finger.

But when landscape changes, you (or certainly **I**) tend to notice. Exactly what the underground room had been, originally, I didn't know. Now, roofless, with six stone steps leading down from the green turf, it was a favourite with the children, for hiding in, and pretending all sorts of things. The one window, which was at ground level on the other side, looked down the slope and towards the cliff-edge a quarter-mile away. Except that, on this day, when I looked through it, I was looking across the top of an apparently-endless forest. And, when I stepped back, there was an arched doorway, just waiting for me to step through. I kept my hand on the door-jamb, just in case, but I stepped part-way through. The doorway came out onto a small ledge on a cliff-side, with no way down other than the obvious, and no-one to talk to. But, somehow, I knew that I was looking into Esh Arvid – that, somewhere, out there, was the Lake and the Tower. And the Ledatic. It felt warmer and I was sure that, wherever this was, it was early spring (which was a curious contrast to the sharp winter day it was at Stowe Head).

I didn't stay long, and when I looked back, the door was gone, and the window showed the slope to the cliff again. But, for a moment ...

The second time was in an evening. I was the last one there (mostly

because Aaron had been sniffing for a week, and I'd sent him home to rest and drink cold remedy, rather than stay and stress his system even more), and we didn't actually have any visitors on the site, so I was finishing paperwork.

Even then, I might not have noticed anything, except that there is next to no artificial light out on Stowe Head, and the nearest town is thirty miles away.

So a glowing pool of light shining from behind a shed caught my attention. At first it might have been a light left on by one of the maintenance workmen – we had a trio of them repointing masonry, maintaining the fences, and touching up paintwork – but as I got closer it became obvious that it wasn't.

For one thing, it was too bright, and for another the colour was too ... natural ... or not unnatural enough.

I turned the corner, and stopped in my tracks – I was looking at dappled sunlight, shining from between two trees which hadn't been there an hour before (and were tall enough that they ought to have been clearly visible from the other side of the shed, if they had been there). I stepped up to the trees and saw woodland beyond, and a blue sky above. I took a breath and stepped through. Then I turned, and was greatly relieved to see that I could still see Stowe Head between the two trees. I didn't want to lose that, so I only went a few steps away, but I was aware of birdsong and fresh daytime breezes.

Suddenly, there came a voice from behind me.

“Welcome back.”

I turned, and saw the Mistress of the House of Books, as Tobias had called her.

“What do you think of it ?” she asked me. “It's very like where you're used to, but – ”

“Where am I ?” I asked.

"You're about three hundred of what you call miles away from where you usually walk," she said. "I wasn't sure that you would see the doorway – I'm pleased that you did."

"Why me?"

"Not everyone can see; not everyone who does, believes; and believing doesn't automatically confer the courage to experience it," she replied.

"I have my own life, to get back to," I said.

"Yes, but I wanted to know that you weren't cut off for ever. Your children are doing well, even without you. And I respect you for the effort you have put in for them."

I was getting increasingly unsure of what was going on, and I walked past her and back to the doorway between the trees.

"Take care of yourself," the Mistress said, and I nodded, and stepped back into my own world.

The third time there was no doubt about it. I'd gone out to walk the site – apparently my predecessor had avoided actually walking across his demesne unless there had been no other option – and got to the far end, where Stowe Head itself is, sticking out into the channel. The air was clear and fresh (if slightly on the chilly side) and I was infused with a sense that I was doing what I was meant to be, when I noticed that a seagull, which had been riding the wind currents, delicately altering its trim millimetre by millimetre, seemed to have stepped dead in mid-air. And when I looked to the sea, the waves were also motionless, frozen in place.

And behind me was no longer the long slow climb up to the first set of ruins ("Feodor's (1904) Keep"), but instead a clearing in woodland. I stepped into it, cautiously, and smelt flowers and rich verdancy.

Then I heard a sound, turned, and saw, swooping down to land beside me, Malclira.

"Is that where you're from ?" she asked, indicating the slice of Stowe Head with one hand.

I nodded. "You can see it ?" I asked.

"Well, yes."

"Where am I ? I mean, this is Esh Arvid, but ... "

"You're not near the lake, if that's what you mean," she said. "This is about two hours' flight away, beyond the Ledatic." She paused: "How did you get here ? How did you open the window ?"

I guessed she was meaning the connection between my world and hers.

"I don't know – it was just there."

"Well, if you can do that ... The mouselings are fine, by the way. I'm letting them store things in the bottom of my ... the tower. They made me a shawl, and they're working on a bowl to hold fruit and things for me."

"I'm glad things are working out," I said.

"When will you be back more often ?" Malclira asked, and for a moment I sensed vulnerability from her, for the first time.

"I don't know," I admitted. I felt a sort of tugging inside me: somehow I knew that I had to return to England. "I have to go now, but I will be back as soon as I can."

I stepped back onto Stowe Head, and turned to wave goodbye. Malclira waved, then rubbed her eyes and took off again, as the woodland scene faded away like mist on a swift wind.

I was alone, on Stowe Head, with the sea and the seagulls, and a feeling that I had crossed some sort of threshold.

Author's Note

Looking back at the original version of these words, I find that I owe a debt of gratitude to some of the people who supported me. And the greatest debt, and the one which I can never repay, is to Keris, who had he been here now, would have insisted on all of Mary-Sue going into print (although he had a long list of edits (mostly typos) which he had found for me) – he said that it was going to be something for which the “dead-tree” version would be a looked-for asset.

The others are Jonathan and Jane, for their consistent supporting comments, and their subtle guidance in what did and didn't work (because, for me, everything both works (I wrote it, so (modestly) it has to be good), and doesn't (in the hands of a real writer it would be so much better).

Book 2 begins shortly. It is called “Northcombe”, just as Book 1 was post-datedly credited with the title “Spring”.

Thank you for reading – and please enjoy