

I

The Misfortunes of Finbar Direach

1

‘This must be the place. Or if not, it can’t be too far away,’ Triona Greenwood, the new Heritage Commissioner, told her two companions.

Yet far from being relieved after their arduous journey, she felt ill at ease and vulnerable. Perhaps coming here had been a mistake, or would result in mistakes further down the line. Despite these misgivings, or because of them, Triona never questioned that the grant to the Centre for Alternative Healing must be handled personally, for the sake of everyone involved. It was the first major assignment since her promotion into the job. But she alone knew the true issues, and how much depended on the outcome of her trip.

They had a cold coming of it, and by no means at the best time of the year. All the same, with modern four-wheel drive vehicles and global positioning technology a trip to West Penwith, even in the most desolate days of December, holds no special terrors. Travelling swiftly in a specially designed Heritage Land Rover, they departed the city in high spirits, sped through Surrey’s opulent glades and at noon were cheered by the sight of the henge stones, where a few windswept Druids were going through the motions for winter solstice. None but Triona guessed that, if challenged, they would turn out to lack real insight into the old traditions and to be actuaries, librarians, and governors of minor public schools.

CARYDDWEN'S CAULDRON

After the flat terrain they journeyed through brown bluffs, past towns and across heathlands before bridging the Tamar, and Triona explained how its name, like that of London's river, derived from the arcane word for time. But, she added, *that* torrent was not so easy to negotiate, however much a person might wish to run athwart it. If by this she meant herself, the implication was lost on her companions, whose minds were preoccupied by where they were going to have lunch. They mentioned this concern more than once, but Triona was reluctant to waste daylight and urged them onward into a landscape increasingly transformed by its wintry burden, where drifts lay across fields and sedges and icicles glittered on every sprig and spray. Once they thought they saw a woman in a black veil and white furs crouched beneath a blighted thorn, but when they looked again it was two ravens feasting on a dead ewe.

Still, they made progress. On the A30 and the B3280 the ploughs had been out and it was possible to maintain a steady 40 miles per hour, but near their destination visibility closed in and they were glad to gain the safety of a nearby village.

'We'll ask directions at this friendly inn,' Triona told her companions. 'No doubt the locals will put us right.' Sure enough, a welcoming fire greeted them and when it was perceived they were strangers, a space was cleared closest the hearth, the flowing glass was extended from every side, and it seemed nobody could do enough. But when Triona revealed her objective, a shadow seemed to fall across the room, and the cold wind rattled the casement stays. 'We must find our way to the Centre for Alternative Healing,' she explained, 'and preferably before sunset.' The words were scarcely out of her mouth than all conversation abruptly ceased, the barmaid shrieked in alarm and dropped a flagon of fine home-made cider, prepared to a secret recipe handed down through generations, and those nearest the newcomers shrank back, while those furthest away leaned forward, eager not to miss the slightest detail.

'You don't want to go up there,' warned the eldest villager at length, as the others nodded agreement. 'Not today. Not ever. Not if you'll take the advice of those that know most about it. Not if you value your peace of mind . . .'

When pressed as to why, the men drowned their beards in well-filled tankards and the women looked mutely away, each reluctant to

The Misfortunes of Finbar Direach

be the bearer of bad news. It was clear that relations between the village and the clifftop were less than cordial, for it had been a place of unfortunate omen long before its present use. Earliest stories connected it with figures from remote legend, and through history and pre-history a watchtower had stood on the site, warning communities below of sea-raiders, storms and other pelagic incursions. But later it was used by the authorities to monitor shipping, and once sixteen long-shoremen were gibbeted from the cliff edge for failure to comply with import duty regulations. From that point, bad reputation clung to the place, and rumours swarmed around it like flies around a cow's behind. Still, it exercised fascination on a certain kind of mind, and was rarely untenanted even before the present sect of healers made it their own.

'We can't argue with their medical achievements,' acknowledged the villagers, when they had recovered from the initial shock. 'But too many things have happened there that are not easy to account for, even in this scientific age.'

'I think you're trying to tell us something,' Triona said.

'Only this,' the villagers repeated. 'On no account climb the western headland at dusk on the shortest day of the year. Or if you do so, don't expect to come down the same person as you went up.'

But Triona thought to herself that change is the inevitable lot of human beings, and is often the only alternative to staying the same. Therefore she thanked the villagers, whom she understood meant well, but said she and her companions had come here to do what they must, and if necessary, they were prepared to take the consequences.

'Besides,' she added, 'it may only be ignorance and superstition that make you feel as you do.'

The villagers misunderstood this remark and said they would not go so far as to accuse the occupants of the Centre of ignorance and superstition, even though it was no stranger to unusual goings-on. But, they said, if they were Triona, Heritage Commissioner or no Heritage Commissioner, they would meet its leaders on neutral ground, and make it clear that they were not going to stand for any nonsense.

Triona thanked them for this advice, but then as she turned to leave one woman, bolder than the rest, clutched her sleeve and thrust something into her hand, and when Triona looked down she felt oddly unsurprised that it was a root of common hogweed skilfully woven into a fairy knot,

CARYDDWEN'S CAULDRON

which in those parts is supposed to guard against anything untoward. 'Do not stay up there tonight,' warned the woman, pulling her shawl closer as if against an unseen chill. 'But if you do – place this over the latch of your door before you sleep. For although under normal circumstances the reputation of the Heritage Commission is sufficient protection in itself, you are a long way from home, and I don't believe you've told us your entire purpose in coming here.'

'You seem to understand my reasons better than the others,' admitted Triona, 'and perhaps you've guessed why I'm drawn towards the very fate you wish to protect me from. I would say more – but the hour is getting late, and I've no wish to be caught in the open after dark.'

After this conversation they had left the inn, although they were aware that the muttering of voices continued long after its cosy world was barred behind them. There was a track leading upwards through the foothills, but before long they had to abandon the Land Rover and proceed by donkey, and near the summit even the donkey needed to be abandoned and the new Commissioner and her young assistants, both inexperienced in this kind of work, were obliged to haul their equipment by hand. Their ascent took them across vertiginous crags and through furze brakes, peat bogs, and fathomless crevasses, until they were overwhelmed with mud and mire, soiled with clammy ordures and stuck about with burrs, briars, and brambles, all under a fine dusting of winter snow.

Under such circumstances, even when they finally breasted the rise, Triona could not be certain of their position, but guessed, for better or worse, they were nearing the journey's end. 'This looks like it,' she repeated. 'But appearance isn't everything, and I've been wrong before . . .'

The structure loomed up from a fold in the high ground, its dark stones capped with snow, a ruined tower buttressing its seaward side. The granite pile extending inland lacked any sense of design, as if the stones had been allowed to find their own lie and level, and then topped off by such slates as came to hand. Perpendiculars slouched at drunken angles, sagging roof beams sagged further under a weight of snow. Bushes and shrubs round about were stunted by high winds. A single rowan tree rose aloof from the main building at a distance equivalent to the length of its own shadow in the ailing light. Closer by was a stand

The Misfortunes of Finbar Direach

of elders and a snow covered bramble thicket. The herb gardens were spiked with frost and a fuel stack comprised old fence posts, window frames, and the chainsawed remains of a fishing boat deck. Woodlands suitable for logging are no longer known of west of the Fal estuary. 'Well,' she added, 'dusk is coming on, and it's too late to go back.'

Perhaps for Triona, it had always been too late. Had she not always known that she must make this journey, or a similar one? She was now a Heritage Commissioner, and such responsibility is not given to many. Yet in the deep, companionless reaches of the night, she sometimes questioned fundamental decisions regarding her past and future. In her earliest years, she had taken all her parents could give her, and the best schools that were to be had. But childhood in the charmed surroundings of Coldharbour Abbey seemed far away. Her favourite sister had been lost under circumstances which disturbingly recalled the legends of a lost people. She had a number of other sisters, but they were compromised and might be in danger, although it was still unclear why. The husband she thought she loved had turned out to be a person she hardly recognized. Dreams of Leatherwing came to her with greater frequency, although she did not yet know his true nature. More than once, she found herself envying the sister who had gone, and thought she would do anything to be with her. 'But life', reflected Triona, 'is not that simple – and death may be even less so.'

So she set her face towards the Centre for Alternative Healing, in which life and death were so inextricably intertwined. Although modern hospitals have sometimes been criticized for the insensitivity of their financial controls and the dereliction of their sanitary contractors, the Centre for Alternative Healing made the poorest of them look like a five star hotel. But in the modern hospitals people died, and in the Centre for Alternative Healing people lived. So it was said. Therefore there should be no contest. But, thought Triona, there is always a contest. All you can do is keep an open mind.

The door, when they reached it, was heavily constructed in iron and decorated with symbols from now forgotten history and inscriptions which might have meant anything, or nothing. The knocker was shaped like a lady with the head of a doe, and when swung, echoed hollowly into the edifice suggesting that however much of the building was visible above the hillside, its galleries reached deep within. They heard no

footsteps when these echoes died, but the portal swung wide to reveal a young woman in the traditional attire of a public relations executive, which went oddly with her surroundings and was entirely in contrast to the appearance of Triona and her assistants, their assault on the slopes having left them drenched, dishevelled, and besmirched with every kind of organic residue.

'I'm Triona Greenwood, from the Heritage Commission, and these are my two assistants. We're sorry we look as if we've been dragged through a swamp,' Triona said rather accusingly, 'but what with the weather conditions, the climb, and the state of the paths – well – we could have fallen to our deaths, and no-one would have been the wiser.'

If the woman in the doorway had entertained this possibility, or was aware that certain interests would have been served by exactly such an accident, she gave no sign of it. 'I'm Linden Richmond. I've been doing promotion and liaison since the management changes,' she announced with the breeziness peculiar to her profession, although for a variety of reasons Triona knew this only too well. Linden Richmond did not look like a member of an alternative healing community, especially one which you couldn't get to without being nearly killed and covered in mud, but there had been many changes at the Centre. She quickly checked their credentials and let them know that, whatever the outcome of their visit, it would be the Centre's policy to make them as welcome as possible.

'And don't worry about the floor,' she added, looking at their encrusted footwear. 'One of the first things we intend to buy with the grant, is a doormat. You have to understand there are still people here who consider that any subsidy from the establishment would be selling out. It starts with a doormat, they say, and ends with a multi-million dollar entertainment complex and theme park. Look at Findhorn, they say. What can you do? They see themselves as a spiritual community dedicated to the ancient Celtic arts of health and healing. As they put it – we are not EuroDisney.'

'Still,' said Triona, 'in a clinical environment . . . '

'I know what you mean. But these traditionalists say, if people get dirt on them from the climb, let them wipe it off on the walls and chairs. They'd tell you that our menial, Finbar Direach, sponges everything down regularly enough. They think the old ways are best. They think

The Misfortunes of Finbar Direach

that the occasional bit of muck getting into the medicines plays a part in our outstanding success rate with inoperable conditions. If it isn't broken, their view is, don't fix it.'

'Yet you yourself', ventured Triona, who had read the files in detail, 'are a modernizer.'

'If the world stands still', she replied, 'how can it ever go forward? But I'm still seen as an outsider, because I report to the new investment company. There are very few people here that I can rely on.' And she tapped the side of her nose significantly.

'I believe we understand each other,' answered Triona, who knew more than she wished to reveal about the recent investment by Myles Overton's controversial leisure group. 'And in this day and age, understanding is everything. We'll talk later. The truth is, no-one really knows who they can trust. Even my assistants sometimes seem to have their own agenda. I don't mind telling you there are people who'd just as soon see the Centre closed down as not. But for the moment, keep that under your hat, because it's early days.'

Linden Richmond nodded, as though this were no more than she had expected. As she led them through the passages and hallways, she explained how she had taken her present position after leaving a management post at EuroDisney, where she began to question the value of what she did, and even, on occasion, to doubt her own abilities. She worked mainly for the external investment company and the Centre was not her only nor even her main responsibility as a publicist. But she had been able to bring to the alternative healing industry the discipline, contacts, and interpersonal skills of a competitive commercial environment, and this had enabled her to rise rapidly in its hierarchy. 'Just because the goals of an organization are humane,' she said, 'there's no reason why its operation should be inefficient or woolly-headed.'

Her success had nevertheless made her enemies as well as allies; enemies who were jealous of her pay and position and said her high standing had nothing to do with interpersonal skills and she had never worked at EuroDisney. On the contrary, Linden's enemies muttered, she was drafted in to fend off press enquiries when the old Head of the Centre disappeared under suspicious circumstances and Myles Overton, the famous Australian leisure-industry mogul, acquired an undisclosed percentage. Myles Overton's connections, they believed, were the only

reason they were being considered for a grant at all. Linden was there to safeguard his interests, for Linden was amongst those closest to him. Not to put too fine a point on it, there was talk that she was his niece, and she was being groomed for the very top.

Rumour, of course, is rumour, and truth is truth. But Triona had read the files, so she knew there was more than a little substance to what Linden's enemies asserted. Myles Overton's interests spanned the entertainment and leisure sectors, extending from cable TV and consumer products to clubs, travel, and as a logical extension of his hotel chain, privatized penal institutions. Triona was aware that Linden Richmond handled publicity for the whole group, because Triona's sister Nuala was in one of the privatized penal institutions and knew her well.

That, among other reasons, was why, when the assignment at the Centre came up, Triona knew she must take it herself. There had been too many coincidences. It was clear that someone was up to something, even if it was hard to see who, and what. But for the moment, if Linden Richmond chose not to say, 'Hi, I know your sister, I visit her all the time in my uncle's gaol!' then Triona chose not to say, 'Hi, my sister Nuala's told me all about you; thanks for bringing her all the copies of *Country Living!*' Better, thought Triona, to play one's cards close to one's chest. Even though she knew that Linden, like herself, secretly belonged to the Network of Successful Women, there was too much at stake to confide in her.

Out loud she said that she was not particularly concerned about truth, or even rumour, but must simply satisfy the Heritage Commission that its money was being wisely spent. For the figure of a million pounds had been mentioned – and everything should be done by the book.

'I'll give you a tour of the facility,' Linden Richmond agreed, 'and introduce you to everyone of importance. Feel free to ask any questions you wish – since, as our guest, no request you make can be refused. Having said that, though I'm a modernizer myself, there are some traditions all visitors are asked to respect.'

'My job', said Triona, 'is about respecting traditions. But what have you in mind?'

'Well, the first one is, you're asked never to open the sealed door at the western extremity of the building, nicknamed Rhiannon's Perch by some of our younger acolytes. Of course it's nothing but a superstition,

The Misfortunes of Finbar Direach

but there are those who are convinced that opening it would prove our undoing, and a major disaster could not be averted.’

‘People’s beliefs are an important part of their culture,’ replied Triona. ‘Even when they seem difficult to understand.’

Linden Richmond looked a little happier at this, but hurried on to the next point.

‘The second thing is – you’re free to eat and drink from the various herbal preparations and potheens which have made the community famous. But while you may use any other receptacle, make sure you don’t take even a sip from the Cup of Charms, which hangs in the pantry above the Aga. Obviously as educated people we can’t take too much notice of old stories, but the consensus here is that to sip so would bring bad consequences not only to the drinker, but to all loyal members of our community.’

‘I’d as soon drink out of one cup as another,’ said Triona. ‘So that won’t be a problem. But the herbal preparations sound nice.’

‘They’re very nice,’ Linden confirmed. ‘And very good for you. But the third tradition is just as important as the other two, because you may speak to any member of our little group, but on no account must you exchange a single word or even a gesture with Finbar Direach, the caretaker here. For although he knows nothing of importance, he’s a danger to himself and others. I have to tell you that it’s only by isolating him in this remote spot and employing him in menial tasks that we can prevent a repetition of the kind of cataclysmic event in which he’s previously been implicated.’

Although from these words Triona was sure Linden Richmond had her best interests at heart, she could not help feeling a stab of curiosity about what had been said. This was in no way diminished by the glimpse of a hooded figure of strange appearance and meagre stature, who, as they were talking, slipped past them into the shadows making some affectation of domestic duty. For it was clear this individual had been listening to everything they discussed.

‘This is a strange place,’ Triona observed to her assistants, although perhaps she had always known it would be. ‘And this Finbar Direach character, unless I’m much mistaken, is by no means the least strange of its denizens.’

‘Strange,’ answered the assistants, ‘but true.’

CARYDDWEN'S CAULDRON

'Well,' Triona told them, 'there's no time to speculate. A recital of original music and poetry has been prepared in our honour tonight. We'll need to change our clothes and dry out our equipment. Whatever happens, it's important to act naturally, and not give the impression that anything untoward is afoot.'

But although Finbar Direach's cowl concealed the details of his face as he slipped past them, just before he disappeared his eyes peered from beneath it and directed a single, terrible glance in Triona's direction. The burden of that glance was neither of defiance nor threat, but only a deep enduring sadness and an overwhelming access of guilt. Whatever Finbar Direach had done, whether deliberately or not, it was clear that the consequences were as impossible to endure as they were to elude.

2

It is said that beyond the crags of West Penwith a forest once grew where now Atlantic waves crash grey and indefatigable against the Longships Reef. And it is true that, on the very lowest spring tides, one may find the petrified stumps of elms and oaks beneath the water, together with the remnants of flint axes, bronze shoe trees and charcoal burners' huts. Certainly a flourishing community sustained itself where now only fulmars, spider crabs, and oar-weed find an environment truly congenial to their needs. Yet the fact that a culture existed in those parts and was lost to the encroachments of the sea is no evidence for claims that it possessed any unusual qualities or value. Still less that it was synonymous with a Celtic mysticism linking the necromancer Leatherwing, the vanished race of the Tuatha de Danaan who were once the ruling powers of the archipelago, and the magic cauldron that belonged to Caryddwen, Druid alchemist of the *Mabinogion*.

This last artefact does indeed figure frequently in the legends of the area, as does the Arthurian Grail with which it is often identified. Both vessels are associated in stories with the acquisition of wisdom or spiritual enlightenment, the indefinite prolongation of life, and cures for various ailments over which conventional medicine cannot prevail. Such stories may have their roots in historical events but have been vastly embellished over the centuries. Quite possibly embellishers included the

The Misfortunes of Finbar Direach

spiritualists, homeopaths, and yogis whose loose association formed the basis of the Centre for Alternative Healing. Clearly they were glad to have a provenance for their procedures and claims. Historical background, however, weighed little with the Heritage Commission, which was mainly concerned with the Centre's amenity value. But it added colour to the place and was one reason for disproportionate press interest, and therefore the delicacy of issues concerning the involvement of the authorities in its activities.

3

'The delicate nature of such issues can't be overstated,' remarked the authorities in a secret conference they were holding on the subject with Strategic Marketing plc, their independent consultants. 'Remember Stonehenge. Remember Findhorn. This time it may be different – we have an operative on the ground. But the dangers are self-evident.'

'The Heritage Commissioner – Triona Greenwood – is a safe pair of hands,' replied the executives from Strategic Marketing. 'Even if she weren't, we can state that one of her assistants is already on our pay-roll. Look askance if you like, but when you hired us to assist in this affair, you demanded results, not pussy-footing around. Remember, if we all play our cards right, this could be what we strategic marketing experts (small s, small m!) call a win-win situation for all concerned.'

The executives were undoubtedly thinking of merchandising rights, split-revenue deals, video royalties and recording contracts. They could already see, in their minds' eyes, people walking around in tee-shirts saying:

My Sister Went to the Centre for Alternative Healing Who Cured Her Of Terminal Ovarian Cancer And All I Got Was This Lousy Tee-shirt.

They were confident that the creative boys would tidy up the slogan, and they knew a winning formula when they saw one. And that was before you even talked about the amazing herbal remedies for cellulite and baldness which, the marketing executives thought, had even more going for them than the cancer cures. The semiotic history of the British Isles and the links between Celtic mysticism and sea-level change could not have been further from their minds. Myles Overton's money

CARYDDWEN'S CAULDRON

was involved, because the authorities insisted that a project like this could only be carried through in partnership with a private sector investor. And everyone knew Myles Overton cared only about the bottom line. Strategic Marketing did not know that the Heritage Commissioner on whose dedication to duty they set such store had a more deeply rooted and personal reason for trekking out to the nethermost regions of Cornwall in the teeth of a blizzard. Had they had any inkling of this, it might have changed everything.