

A POCKETFUL OF
CROWS

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Runemarks

Runelight

The Gospel of Loki

A POCKETFUL OF CROWS

Joanne M. Harris



GOLLANCZ

LONDON

First published in Great Britain in 2017 by Gollancz
an imprint of the Orion Publishing Group Ltd
Carmelite House, 50 Victoria Embankment
London EC4Y 0DZ

An Hachette UK Company

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

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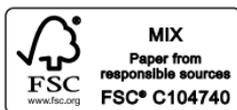
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A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN 978 1 473 22218 2

Typeset by Input Data Services Ltd, Somerset

Printed in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc



www.joanne-harris.co.uk

www.orionbooks.co.uk

www.gollancz.co.uk

May Eve



*I am as brown as brown can be,
And my eyes as black as sloe;
I am as brisk as brisk can be,
And wild as forest doe.*

The Child Ballads, 295

One

The year it turns, and turns, and turns. Winter to summer, darkness to light, turning the world like wood on a lathe, shaping the months and the seasons. Tonight is May Eve, and the moon is full for the second time this month. May Eve, and a blue milk moon. Time for a witch to go travelling.

Tonight I am a vixen. I could have been an owl, or a hare, or a lark, or a wolf, or an otter. The travelling folk can take any guise. But tonight – this special night, when wildfires burn and witches fly – tonight, I am a vixen.

I leave my clothes by the fireside. The feather skirt, the wolfskin cloak, the necklaces of polished stones. Naked, I turn in the firelight; moon-silver, fire-golden. And now I can hear the sounds of the night: the lapping at the water's edge; the squeak of a mouse in the

long grass; the calling of owls in the branches. I can hear the tick-tick-ticking of a death-watch beetle in a beam over half a mile away; I can catch the sleepy scent of lilacs on the common. I cast my gaze further. The vixen is near. Half-asleep in her warm earth, she senses my presence and pricks up her ears. The three fat cubs beside her are sleepy, filled with warm milk. But the vixen is restless, sensing me so close, so unfamiliar.

I send her the small, persistent desire for a run beneath the stars. She lifts her head and flexes her jaws, wary but still curious. I send her the feel of the cool night air, the mossy ground beneath my feet, the hunger in my belly. Shivering, I turn from the fire and walk into the forest. The ground is soft and damp and cold. It smells of rain, and bluebells. My skin is striped with moonlight, brown and silver under the trees. For a moment I see the vixen, red as embers under smoke, a single flash of white at her throat, trotting alongside me.

The scents of the forest intensify, a tapestry of shining threads that run in every direction. The vixen's fur is warm and thick; I am no longer shivering. For a time I run alongside her, feeling her strength and the fierce joy of hunting under a blue milk moon, with the promise of blood in the air and summer no more than a heartbeat away. Then, in a moment, we are one.



Wild creatures feel hunger differently. My own is deep as wintertime; frugal as old age. The vixen's is joyous; exuberant; sniffing for frogs under the turf; snapping at moths in the shining air. We reach the river – voles and rats – but I am hungry for something more. I follow the river until it leads to a place of open fields, and from there to the edge of a village, where the scent of prey is strong. I follow the trail of a speckled hen into a wooden henhouse, and there I am without mercy, leaving nothing but feathers.

The moon is ringed with silver – a sign. The air is sweet as summertime. Belly full and with blood on my jaws, I linger in the meadow mist, under the bank of hawthorn that marks the village boundary. Then after

a time, smelling smoke, I leave the vixen to return to her cubs and, naked in my own skin, I lie down in the sedge-grass and listen to the sounds of the night, and hear the owls a-calling, and watch the long, slow dance of the stars.

Tonight marks the coming of summertime. Fourteen summers I have known. Wildfire, hearth fire, bonfires lit against the dark. Cherry blossom, love charms, village girls with warm hearts, dancing in the circle of stones that stands around the fairy tree. The village girls are white and soft. Their laughter sounds like tame birds. Geese, perhaps, their wings clipped, plump, well fed, obedient. Village girls are new-baked bread. Village girls have blossom skin. Village girls have braided hair that shines like evening sunlight.

I am not a village girl. I am brown, and brisk, and wild. I hunt with the owl, and dance with the hare, and swim with the trout and the otter. I never go into the village, except as a vixen or a rat. The village is dangerous to our kind. The Folk would kill us if they could. But tonight is different. The hunt has made my blood sing. And so I linger under the thorn, smelling the scent of the young grass and listening to the distant sound of voices from the clearing.

There comes the sound of footsteps on the path by the hawthorn. A village girl with primrose hair is

standing by the fairy tree. The Folk call it that, even though they know nothing of the Faërie. But there *are* charms – the bone of a hare; a name, stitched on red flannel – that even a village girl can use. And on May Eve, by a blue moon, a love charm hung from a fairy tree may bring even a village girl the quickening of summertime.

The fairy tree is a hawthorn. Twisted and raddled, old as Old Age, half-eaten with mistletoe, she stands inside the circle of stones that some Folk call the fairy ring. Every year, I tell myself: maybe this is the year she will die. But every year the pale buds break from those cracked and knotted boughs. The fairy tree is hopeful. Her blossom barely lasts a week. But every year she quickens, and bears a handful of scarlet berries.

The girl has a charm. They always do. A love charm, or perhaps a spell to make herself more beautiful. I watch from the hedge as she ties it in place. The shadows of the fairy stones flicker in the moonlight.

Tonight she will dream of her young man, restless on her virgin's bed. Perhaps she will watch the bright May moon slicing past her window. And tomorrow, or the next day, he will see her standing there – a girl he has seen many times before, but never noticed until now – and he will wonder how he could have been so blind as to miss her.

When she has gone, I take the charm. She will think the fairies have taken it. A scrap of red fabric, the colour of blood, torn, perhaps, from a petticoat, and pushed through a polished adder-stone. I had such a charm-stone once, but I lost it long ago. Where did the village girl find hers? How long did she take to embroider the charm, by the light of her candle? What name did she speak as she knotted the thread?

I look at the tiny stitches. Six little letters, embroidered in silk. I myself cannot read words. There was no one to teach me. But I do know *letters*; those magical signs that speak from the page, or even the grave. There is power in them, a power that even the Folk do not understand. Letters have meaning. They can make words. And words can build almost anything – a law, a chronicle, a lie.

The name in the letters is W-I-L-L-A-M. This is the name his mother gave him. This is the name his lover will speak into his ear, in the dark. This is the name they will carve on his stone, when they put him into the ground.

I have no name. The travelling folk have neither name nor master. When I die, no stone will be laid. No flowers will be scattered. When I die, I will become a thousand creatures: beetles, worms. And so I shall travel on, for ever, till the End of the Worlds. This is

the fate of the travelling folk. We would not have it otherwise.

I carry the charm to my place in the woods. A hut of split logs and willow and moss, all lined with skins and bracken. My firepit is just outside, and my iron cooking pot. Hungry, I fry some fiddleheads, and with them some bacon, a handful of herbs and the hindquarters of a rabbit that was hanging in the smoke. And then I tie the village girl's charm over the entrance to my hut, with all my beautiful coloured things. A blue glass bead, some yellow wool, the whitened skull of a magpie. The coloured things that I collect and hide away in the forest.

Coloured things are forbidden to us, we the canny travelling folk. Colours mean danger to our kind; they reveal us to the enemy. Our folk hide from everyone – even from each other. Our folk know to keep aloof, to never show their colours.

Village girls wear coloured things. Ribbons on their bonnets. Scarlet flannel petticoats. Village girls are not afraid. Village girls like to be noticed. But brown is easy; brown is safe. In the forest, no one sees a brown girl slip from tree to tree, to vanish in the bracken. In the forest I am a doe, a stoat, a fox, a nightingale. Berry-brown, I live in the trees. Brown, I cast no shadow.

This is how I go unseen, untroubled by the village folk. Only their dogs know where I am, and they have learnt to keep away. I have eaten dog before, and will again, I tell them. I sit on my wolfskin blanket, wrapped in my skirt of homespun cloth and my coat of sparrow feathers and I look into the smoke to see what the future will bring me.

Tomorrow is May Day. The flowery month: the month of hawthorn and of bees. Tomorrow, there will be merriment, and dancing on the village green. Tomorrow, the village girls will dress the springs and wells with flowers, and leave offerings for Jack-in-the-Green, and crown a maiden Queen of the May. But that's no concern of mine. I have no need of garlands. I have the bluebells in the wood, and the hawthorn in the hedge. No young man will steal my heart with words of love and garlands. No young man will catch my eye. When the heat is on me, I will go into a doe, and take my pick of the young bucks, and never once look back.

The vixen sleeps in the warm earth, surrounded by small, furry bodies. The brown hare in the moonlight dances on the hillside. The barn owl hunts: the field mouse runs; the fire dies down to embers. And I will go into my hut and draw the deerskin curtain, and go to sleep on my narrow bed of brown wool and of bracken.

May

The Month of Bees



*When the ragweed blooms in May
Witches ride, and good Folk pray.*

Cornish proverb



One

Today, I will be a skylark, flying sweetly into the blue. Or perhaps I shall go into a hare, and run across the hillside, and box the shadows of the sedge, and nibble at the cowslips. Today, I am restless, uncertain of what I want and where to go. Over my breakfast of broken bones, I feel the morning sun on my face and long for the freedom of the hills.

But food is not yet plentiful, and travelling must be paid for. Last night's adventure has left me weak, in spite of the strength of the village girl's charm, and so I take my collecting bag – the charm safe in my pocket – and set off for the riverside, the open fields and my willow traps, which might catch me a bird or two, or maybe even a rabbit.

Today I am lucky. I bag four thrush, some May

buds and a pocketful of fiddleheads, those tight little ferns, which, like the Folk, are so tender while they're young, but bitter poison when they grow. It is enough. I turn to go back, but suddenly I hear horses' hooves on the path behind me. A riding-horse with iron shoes, trotting at a lively pace some quarter of a mile away. Quickly, I step off the path and hide behind a deadfall of broken trees. The horseman will be gone soon, and then I will be on my way.

A few minutes later, I see the horse, a chestnut with a black mane, and riding, a man in a May-green coat, wearing a garland of flowers. Quickly, my hand seeks the village girl's charm. An adder-stone gives protection for those who do not want to be seen. The stone is smooth and cool in my hand. The scrap of scarlet petticoat shows bright between my fingers.

I would not normally look up. I do not want to be noticed. And yet I am curious to see more of the horse and its rider. Carefully, I peer out from between the spurs of the deadfall just as he passes beside me, the buttons on his green coat flashing in the sun.

A nobleman, then – I can tell by his boots, and by the way he looks around as if he owns the trees themselves. His hair is as smooth as his horse's flank. Why do I even notice him? Is it the adder-stone in my hand, that wants me to see him more clearly? I

raise the polished stone to my eye and look at the man through the narrow bore. Somehow I know that he will look back. I know that his name is W-I-L-L-A-M. And now, as he turns, as I knew he would, I see that he is handsome.

Just at that moment, the fine brown horse stumbles on the stony path. The young man, taken off balance, slips and falls out of his saddle. The horse rears up, its eyes wild, its hooves striking sparks against the stones. The young man will be trampled, and there is no one to help him. And so I jump out from my hiding place and catch the horse's bridle.

A soothing cantrip: the horse is soon calmed. Wild horses are different. Wild horses do not welcome our touch. But this one is a riding-horse; nervous, but trained to the bridle. I turn now to the master, who is lying on the path. He is a little dazed by the fall, but he is out of danger. I notice that he is very young, barely older than I am. I tether the horse to a nearby branch and prepare to vanish into the woods.

'Wait.' I turn, and see him watching. His eyes are blue as a jay's wing. 'Who are you?'

I do not answer. A named thing is a tamed thing, and my people are wild for ever. I ought to ignore him and walk away. His kind are so often dangerous. And yet, he looks harmless enough on the ground, mud on

the sleeve of his fine green coat, his cheek scratched by a bramble. And he sees me – really *sees* me. I can see a tiny reflection of myself in his eyes. Perhaps that’s why I want to stay, to hear the sound of his voice again, to have him look at me that way and see myself in his blue eyes. No one sees me, as a rule. Even when I show myself, no one *really* sees me.

‘Who are you?’ he says again. His voice is as soft as deer velvet.

I shake my head.

‘Don’t be afraid. Who are you? Where are your people?’

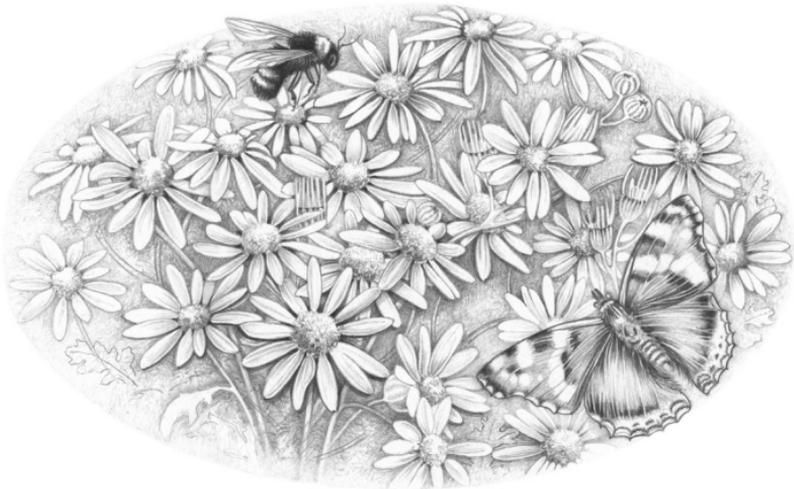
My people are the wolves, the hare, the wild bees in the forest. My people are the birch trees, the roe deer, and the otter. My people are the travelling folk that travel on the campfire smoke, and go into the fox, the wolf, the badger and the weasel. And I am not afraid.

I lift my chin and say: ‘The woods.’

‘Then you must be the Queen of the May,’ he says, and stands, and picks up his May Day garland, which has fallen to the ground. It is a garland of strawberry leaves, woven together with wild rose.

He places it gently onto my hair. ‘Do you have a name?’ he says.

Of course not. Names are for tame folk. Names are for those who are afraid of our kind of freedom.



I think of the village girl's adder-stone charm. I say: 'I know *yours*. It's W-I-L-L-A-M.' He smiles. I wonder why he is not surprised that I know his name. Then I realise that he knows *all* the village girls know his name. All the village girls notice him. All the village girls dream of him, and whisper his name into their pillows. The surprise would be if I did not.

For a moment his arrogance leaves me mute. But even that has a kind of charm. He reminds me of a young stag showing off his first pair of antlers. He has the same kind of awkwardness, of playfulness, of confidence. Something unlike the rest of his kind. Something almost wild.

'It's *Will-i-am*.' He writes it in the dust of the path.

W-I-L-L-I-A-M. With that extra stroke. The village girl must have spelt it wrong.

‘Will-i-am.’ It sounds as sweet as water from the well. He smiles again. I rarely smile. I have no one to smile for. And now I know why I took the charm from the fairy tree last night. Now I begin to understand my restlessness, my hunger. Something was missing from my life. Something I never suspected was wrong. And now, today, something has come to answer the quickening call of the May.

W-I-L-L-A-M.

W-I-L-L-I-AM.

It is only one letter. A single stroke. But I can feel it, nevertheless. He too has a space inside, like the hole in the adder-stone. An emptiness waiting to be filled. Something that was missing. And although I can barely read his name scratched into the dusty path, I already know in my secret heart that the thing that was missing was *I*.