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FOSSIL FUELS by Alan Smale

Yorkshire, 1937

Unerring, uncanny, and silent, Vervain guided her between the slag heaps and across the web of interlocking railway lines, past rows of coal-wagons squat and unmoving in the half-light like black centipedes frozen in the act of crawling from their burrows. Through the wasteland they walked, Vervain fastidiously skirting the oil-streaked puddles while Rosalind clomped through the ash and muck and hazard without regard for her boots. With the confidence of true Cunning, she knew she'd endure far worse before this day was done.

The trail wove between untidy piles of scrap iron and timber towards three long brick buildings fouled by decades of smoke. High atop the biggest building Rosalind saw a pair of wheelheads like giant bicycle wheels mounted onto a tubular gantry, linked by steel hawsers.

The air was ripe with the black smeech of coal dust. It did not take a seer to know the terrible filth that must accumulate in the chests and pores and eyes of the miners who worked here every week of their lives, or to predict their wretched early deaths.

"Near dawn," murmured Rosalind. "We passed the night boys comin' home an hour since." Grimy shadows they'd been, the explosives crew; creeping out whey-faced and exhausted, still reeking of blasting powder. "Day shift must be on seam by now. Why still so quiet?"

"It's an old mine," said Vervain. "Extensive. Once down under they still have to hike to the coalface. Could be miles. It's not like they just drop in and start whacking away with their pickaxes."

Earlier they'd trudged through the village that supplied the miners for this pit, past dirty terraced cottages shored up with wooden buttresses against underground subsidence; walls cracked, chimneys aslant, the overcrowded shanties of the perennially poor. Even at that early hour slum girls with filthy hair had peered at them out of back kitchens, bright-eyed with suspicion. Rosalind had wanted nothing more than to scoop up those girls, carry them a hundred

miles away and fling them into a mountain stream. Now, here at the pithead, she craved that cleansing stream for herself.

The dawn chilled the landscape, rather than warming it. "Let's get this over with," she said.

As if this was a signal, the colliery awoke. With a creak the giant wheels overhead started to turn, cranking up the first loads of coal from the mine tunnels far below. A tall chimney began to spit smoke. Trucks snaked out of the siding, the steam engine snorting as the brakeman blinked owlishly. Above their heads tubs of slag hung on steel cables, their journey to the heaps arrested by the last end-of-shift; now they, too, reluctantly dragged across the sky toward their final resting place.

Looking further, Rosalind saw people crawling over the slagheaps like lice. Ricketty thin men and dumpy women in shawls, kneeling against the wind to pick out tiny chips of coal from the slag to put into their sacks, too poor to buy the fuel their fellow villagers carved out of the depths. Braving acrid smoke, as many of the heaps smoldered with the slow fire that burned deep within them.

The bleakness of such lives tugged at Rosalind's heart. Not long since, these broken souls might have danced the maypole.

Vervain frowned at her, said "Enough, now!" with some scorn, and led her through the iron doors into the pithead.

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Clegg the foreman wore rough worsted trousers and a patched donkey jacket, collar pulled up against the early-morning chill. These two dodgy characters had put him into a tight spot, and he stood firm against them. "Bad luck for a woman to go down t'pit," he said stolidly. "Worst luck there is."

He spat, and as Rosalind involuntarily watched the gob fly to the floor at his feet she saw the flecks of coal dust in his spittle.

"E'en worse luck if she don't," said Vervain, lapsing into the vernacular. "Specially for you. You've an intruder in your mine already, Mr. Clegg. A bad man. This 'un here'll find him and bring him out, solve your problem right quick."

"I got no problem," said Clegg, and "Aye, you do," replied the slight figure of Vervain with a voice as cold as steel.

"The lads wouldn't like it," said Clegg.

"Then don't tell 'em," said Vervain. "We'll send her down the secondary shaft and she can avoid the main haulage roads. That way she'll not be seen by many." He paused. "We'll not argue about this, will we? 'Cause there's nowt that'll stop us."

"That right?" said Clegg, squaring up.

"Happen so," said Vervain.

Rosalind eyed them. Clegg was bigger and probably fancied himself in a scrap, but he didn't know that Vervain could move swift as greased pig-shit, and had a fist like wood.

"Funny, that," she said, speaking for the first time. "About the women. Used to be that women worked down below all the time. Harnessed to wagons, haulin' tubs of coal up through tunnels on their hands and knees."

"Not for nigh on a hundred year," said the foreman in disgust. To Vervain he said, "You might go, in a pinch. But not the woman."

Vervain took a helmet off a wall-peg and plonked it unceremoniously onto Rosalind's head. All femininity disappeared once her hair was hidden; for all the beauty of her name, Rosalind Theaker was a woman of shocking plainness.

“What woman is that, then?” said Vervain. “Bit o’ coal dust on her cheeks, she’ll easily pass for a boy. Which reminds me, we’ll need one, a boy I mean, for a guide down below. Wouldn’t want our chap ‘ere getting himself lost, eh?”

Clegg didn’t even spare her a glance. “She in’t going. End of story.”

“She’s a Cunning Woman,” said Vervain.

“I’m sure she--“ Clegg shut up abruptly and turned to stare at Rosalind.

“I know,” said Vervain apologetically. “She don’t look so very cunning.”

“Oh, ha ha,” said Rosalind.

Clegg examined her more carefully. Tall for a woman, strong-featured, block-jawed, a nose you could quarry coal with, but no trace of anything untoward. Then, as if she were coming into focus right before his eyes, he suddenly felt her deep solidity. She and Vervain looked not at all similar, but a vein of something old and tough threaded them both.

Startled, Clegg took an involuntary step back and Rosalind, her teeth showing again in what he now realized was a smile, picked up a safety lamp and marched off past him towards the cage.

“Best dirty her up,” said Clegg. “Face is so bright about now, she won’t be needing that lamp.”

*

“Cunning Woman, eh?” said Clegg quietly, as he clipped the battery pack to Rosalind’s waist and plugged the rubber-coated twin-core cable into her helmet. He pushed at the slider and a pale circle of light shone from the bulb on its brim; satisfied, he turned it off to save power.

“Aye,” said Rosalind, fiddling with the helmet straps.

“E’en more reason why you don’t have to do whatever that nancy-boy tells you.”

Now the matter was decided Vervain had lost interest and was wandering around the pithead poking his nose into things and humming. “Not doing it for him,” said Rosalind.

“One of my aunts,” said Clegg. “Cunning and creepy, both. She’d look at a man and tell him all about himself, right to his face. Stuff she couldn’t have known otherwise. And she did herbs, remedies. Going around for dinner you always had to wonder what you were eating.”

She grinned tautly. “I don’t do that. But I know the type.”

Clegg took the lamp from her, pressed the igniter until it lit, and handed it back. It was a tall old-looking thing of battered metal with a flame sheltered in glass and gauze. She felt her hand begin to shake as she took it. “Safety lamp,” he said. “Watch the flame. Any change from the color you see now means the air is bad. If it burns brighter and blue then there’s firedamp about, which is inflammable gas, methane or such. If you’re not sure, turn the lamp down and the flame’ll appear to have a little cap over it. That’s the firedamp burning off. Light starts to flicker and fade by itself, that’s carbon dioxide. Too much o’ that builds up and you can’t breathe anymore. Got that?”

Rosalind grimaced.

“Either way, don’t dally down there. This ‘un you’re hunting, he’s Cunning too?”

“Of course.”

“And what’s this really all about?”

“Long story.” Rosalind paused, then bent down and pulled the knife partway out of her boot. Their eyes met.

He whistled softly. “Like that, eh? Come on.”

The cage was a box of bashed iron panels and mesh held together with rivets, barely narrower than the shaft that opened up beneath it. Above it stretched the steel hawser; the

headgear in the roof linked it to a winding engine in the adjacent building. It swayed as Rosalind stepped in.

“Your boy’ll be waiting at the bottom,” said Clegg.

“All right.”

The cage door rattled and slammed, closing her in.

“Best of British luck to ye,” said Clegg, and pulled the lever to send her down.

*

The lurch and drop of the cage shattered Rosalind’s air of calm confidence. She grabbed at the metal walls and hung on, white-knuckled. Falling through the inky black, the speed of the cage’s descent inspired a breeze upward through the mesh that reeked of coal and grease, cast-iron and rust.

The darkness pierced her like a dagger in her gut. She tasted fear and scrambled to turn on the helmet-lamp, but couldn’t find the slider. Then her eyes adjusted to the lantern’s cool flame.

Several pounding heartbeats later the shaft opened out, now illuminated by the wan flicker of electricity. As the cage clanked to a halt, the onsetter pulled open the door and Rosalind almost fell forward into the mine. He glanced at her incuriously and pulled a small wagon of coal into the cage to replace her before cranking the lever to send it back up.

Rosalind found herself in a hollowed-out area the size and shape of a small church, with the shaft marking the steeple. Instead of pews she saw wagons and toolboxes, ropes, disused lanterns, picks, and crates. Shadows danced across the stone walls. She was a quarter mile underground.

This was the secondary shaft, of course; the shaft less traveled, the backup for use in emergencies. The pit bank at the foot of the main shaft would be alive with wagons and miners and sustained, frantic activity. But Rosalind was supposed to be evading notice.

Her boy was waiting, summoned by Morse code-- Clegg had tapped on a telegraph while Vervain was smearing muck on her face. The boy carried a safety lamp but no helmet. Unsettled from her plummet into the earth she peered at him askance and accidentally saw the hour and nature of his death. *Damn it.*

“S alright,” said the boy cockily, misinterpreting her shudder. “The cage cain’t help but sway and creak. Safe as ‘ouses, it is.”

Another ominous portent to Rosalind, who’d been killed more regularly in her own homesteads than anywhere else. She pulled herself together and walked the boy away from the onsetter. “What’s your name?”

“Peter.”

Dirty ears, no cap, short hair cut badly; a scrappy comma of a boy, not yet robust enough to haul a wagon or pickaxe a seam, Peter managed to achieve a certain gangly awkwardness without actually being tall.

Peter: the rock. The rock was to be her ally. Though this one was barely more than a stone. And, like that other Peter, he’d deny her three times before this was over. But he’d do his best, there at the end.

She watched him sum her up in return, with the instinctual distaste of the young and supple for the old and over-stretched. Irked, she said, “Are boys supposed to come down the mine?”

“Are women?” he replied, and then, hastily, “I’m older than I look.”

So much for concealing her gender. Fortunately the boy seemed unfazed that she was female. “Course you are. I’m Rosalind Theaker.”

“A Cunning Woman?”

She tutted, exasperated. "Clegg needs to keep his trap shut."

"Weren't Clegg what told me. It's plain to see." Peter squinted at her. "And I'm to help you look for someone sneaked down 'ere, who in't a miner?"

Rosalind had to trust Peter at least partway or he'd be no help to her. "Aye. A bad man. A ruffian and a scamp, makes all kinds of mischief. Known as Jack-the-Lad." Or Jack-in-the Green, or Jumping Jack, Jolly Jack, or Puck, Robin.... She bit her lip. If she must speak truth to this whelp, let her speak as little of it as possible.

"Jack-the-Lad?" said Peter. "You're hunting a *boy*?"

"I never said he were young. It's just his name."

"You're mad as a bloomin' hare," said Peter, and turned to lead the way further into the mine.

*

The tunnel was eight feet wide and five feet high, with rough-hewn walls slabbed with shale. Above them hung four hundred vertical yards of solid rock and soil, held at bay by the mercy of God and an array of wooden props barely as thick as Rosalind's arm. The air had a dusty, fiery odor.

She'd been expecting something like a cave. Rosalind understood caves, but this was not one. It was a travesty, a mutilation; the land disemboweled.

Every twenty yards there was a side-tunnel draped with sacking. "They drive the tunnels in pairs," Peter explained. "These headings lead through to t'other of the pair. We're going down the air-in, and that over there's the air-out." The breeze was indeed pushing gently on the backs of their necks.

"The sacking stops the air from taking a short cut. And if one tunnel collapses, t'other provides an escape," Rosalind ventured, and was rewarded with a nod.

"These here ain't main haulage roads, though. You may see 'un later, out beyond, where they raise out the coal."

"Right you are."

"What Cunning are you?" he said suddenly. "What kind?"

Right now, Rosalind didn't feel any kind of Cunning. She felt small and unhappy, dwarfed by Vervain, daunted by Jack-the-Lad, and diminished by the task of seeking him out down here in the bowels of the earth.

"What kind?" the boy persisted, and before she knew it she'd had to answer: "I can see in both directions."

"Eh?" With an exaggerated movement Peter turned his head left and then right. "If I can see both directions, am I Cunning too, then?"

"Nay, just sharp enough to cut yourself. It's other directions I'm talkin' of. Past and future."

"Oh," said Peter. "Oh, those, aye, yeah."

They tromped on in silence, lit only by the anemic pallor of their helmet-lights and the yellow flare of the safety lamps. Rosalind had to constantly duck to pass under the wooden beams or get clouted on the head. She couldn't hear any clamor of mine-working yet; they must have a long way to go. Her breathing quickened and she made an effort to calm it.

"So you're sayin' you can see the future?"

"Aye."

"Fortune-teller, then? Palms and tea leaves?"

"Not like that. It's something I can just... *do*. If I put my mind to it."

“So what’s that like, then?”

Rosalind was tiring of the conversation. “Dunno. What’s it like to be you?”

“Dull,” said the boy. “Down here six days a week, fetch-and-carry, leadin’ folks around.... But you always know what’s going to happen next, you say?”

“Aye. Mostly.”

Peter thought about it. “That might make it e’en more boring yet,” he said.

“It well might,” said she.

The tunnel floor tilted downwards. Their lights reached no more than twenty feet ahead. “Is it much further?”

“Don’t you already know?” he said quickly.

Rosalind sighed. “Right funny. You were waitin’ to say that, weren’t you?”

“Or summat like. We’re not yet a third of the way. Quarter, maybe.” He paused. “So what have you predicted?”

Again she suffered the unstoppable spilling of the truth. “French Revolution, Great Fire. Steamships of metal. Them usin’ gas to kill boys like you in the Great War.” She stopped, eyes hot and bleak, biting her lip. She’d seen and lived through horrors, but much worse was on the way in just a few short years. War across Europe, fire-bombing of cities, genocide.... Unthinkable things that nobody knew of yet but her. She hoped no one would ask.

“French what?” said Peter.

“Just a big mess. Riots and such. They killed a king. A long while back.”

They came to a wide haulage road carved out to twice the size and width of the tunnels they’d been walking, lined with cables, lit by electricity, awash with noise and wagons on a narrow-gauge track. None of the men paid Rosalind and Peter the slightest attention as they crossed it and stepped into the continuation of their tunnel on the opposite side.

“Cain’t go direct,” said Peter. “Be shorter, o’ course, but we’d get in the way of the tubs and the men and have to keep stoppin’. And someone might twig that you’re, well, not a man, and make a fuss. So this is better.”

Rosalind’s back ached from the persistent stooping. “Wait.” She leaned back out into the road and uncricked her neck and inhaled heavily, aware of the steady breeze from the pumping of the air. She’d seen enough now to visualize the mine as a maze of tunnels spreading out from the twin shafts, with the haulage roads as the arteries and tunnels as the veins, each ending at a coalface. In places she’d already seen black slivers in the walls; remnants of a seam.

Rosalind had expected her foreboding to diminish once she escaped the cage. Yet her inner terror was increasing. She was used to the expansiveness of natural caverns, the play of firelight on quartz, the sparkle of underground lakes, water over limestone. Galleries and stalactites. This mine was a strange thing by contrast: man-made and functional, swiss-cheesed. The weight of the rock above seemed to press directly onto Rosalind’s brain. The glare of the electric lights made her flinch. Yet, ahead of them in the smaller tunnel, the darkness threatened her even more.

Scared of the light, and scared of the dark, Rosalind thought. *Peculiar.*

“How old are you?” said Peter.

“Thirty-seven,” she said, “born in 1900, with the century,” though today she felt as old as the earth.

She took a deep breath and ducked into the tunnel. They went on.

*

As she followed the boy's skinny back, Rosalind turned her head askance again. Once more the future leapt into her direct view: images of an England where the importance of coal was diminished and pits were being forcibly closed by a cold, merciless government. National strikes in response, with the rule of law enforced by police armed with batons and shields, men with a job to do, disinclined to mercy, hiding behind their uniforms, often battling their own kin.

And there in her vision stood Peter among the miners. A Peter much older and a little wiser, bull-headed, defying the police for the sake of his family and his livelihood. Rosalind watched the charge and the savage scuffle that ensued, ending with the baton-blow that cleaved his skull. Peter fell in a violent, futile death, fighting strong men backed by powers he could never defeat.

Stupid. Pathetic. Rosalind shivered in the dark.

*

Rosalind couldn't imagine how the miners could walk so far each day, before they even started their work.

Now she was beginning to hear the heavy, aggressive whine of drilling machines. The boom and shiver of the rock was increasing slowly. They were heading for the inferno by inches.

Peter dropped back alongside her. "So. There's this Jack. And against him, there's me and you. And I'm small and you're a woman."

She nodded.

"And him, he's a big man?"

"Don't know. Long time since we met. It's complicated."

"So you don't know how he looks now?"

"...Nay."

"You won't recognize 'un?"

"Oh, I'll know him for who he is."

"And him a real bad 'un?"

"Wicked. Treacherous. Evil."

Peter kicked at a stone and sent it ricocheting off the wall. "It don't make sense, mam, just you and me, up against him?"

Peter's death still shimmered in Rosalind's peripheral vision, its resonance unsettling. Aye, whyever set yourself up against a stronger foe? "It's not the same."

"What?"

"I'll win. How this ends in't in doubt."

"Not to you, maybe," he muttered.

The coalface waited ahead, black as doom.

*

Rosalind's ears rang with the outrageous cacophony. She gulped down coal dust with every breath. The boy looked up, seeking her reaction, but it took time for Rosalind to make sense of what she saw, and once she did, her emotions ran too deeply to show on her face.

This, then, was the coalface; this, then, was Hell.

The shiny coal lay woven through the rock in thin seams. The seam the men were working now was four feet in height, banded above and below by ash-colored rock. The miners' task was to remove the filling from a rock sandwich, the roof above them shored up only by temporary wooden props and by the intrinsic tension of the rock itself.

Through a haze of coal and smoke, Rosalind saw hard, darkened men rosy with muscle lined up along the seam. Kneeling stripped to the waist, clad in only britches and boots, they shoveled coal over their shoulders onto the clattering conveyor belt a yard behind them with the inhuman speed of the possessed. Ahead of the line of shovelers a metal machine the size of a coffin hauled itself along the rock face, guided by a steel hawser and powered by a compressed-air turbine. Solid teeth many inches long bit deep into the coal, hacking free large chunks of the sleek black rock.

Among and between, other men leaned into the cramped gallery to thump at the coal with picks and iron bars to bring it down and break it up, conspiring with the machine and their fellow men to carve a deep horizontal groove into the rock.

The roar from the conveyor belt fought with the screech of the metal digging machine that ripped it down from the gallery. The fog of the coal dust scattered the light from their electric torches and safety lamps back into their eyes. Rosalind blinked convulsively, and swallowed and cleared her throat at the same time.

This was vital work. A newcomer to the industrial world, Rosalind nonetheless knew that coal was the lifeblood of England, and would remain so even after men learned how to unleash massive power from corrupt matter in its tiniest form a few years hence. But, at such a price.... How were these men not deaf in a day, maimed in a week, blind in a month?

Rosalind tried not to look askance, but grim images still leaked back to her from their arid futures. Human lifespans would set to lengthen almost unbelievably in the coming years... but not for these men.

The heartbreak threatened to overwhelm her. But it would shame her to show weakness in front of Peter. She sought out the ancient strength at her core, and took power from it.

The boy looked from Rosalind to the miners and back again. His lips framed the words: Well? D'you see him? Is Jack here?

Aye, Rosalind saw Jack, and felt him all around her in the chaos that enclosed them and the reek of tortured metal. Jack's spore lined the walls and hung in the foul air. His essence was pervasive. The Jack-in-the-Green had stood here, not long since.

"We're right on his tail," she said calmly, unable to hear her own words.

For here was the coal: buried tropical forests from the Paleozoic, ancient glades from before the time of men, compressed and fused and now at the mercy of the human gnomes who gave the best of themselves to rip it from the bowels of the earth.

Jack had needed to see this. He had been compelled to witness the long-dead fossil trees being brutally harvested from the rock walls of this place. And, for his own mad motives, he'd wanted Rosalind to experience it too.

She tugged Peter back around a corner and through a heading until they were far enough from the infernal racket that she could be heard.

"We're at the wrong end," she said.

"What?"

"This here's the future," she said. "Here, where we're standing? This is *me*, Rosalind, my direction. The wrong direction. Jack was here, but he's gone now. And to catch up with 'un we'll have to head t'other way, Jack's way. Off into the past."

Peter rebelled, of course, denied her for the first time with his *I'll not go* and *It's too dangerous* and *You can't make me*, but Rosalind had sharp words with him and now he led the way once more, though still muttering and sulky.

He took her a few hundred yards down the long haulage road, swerving around the coal tubs and the cursing men and coming perilously close to the sharp banded edges of a conveyor belt, then diagonally through to another identical tunnel. The din of the coalface faded, though if Rosalind placed her hand against the rock wall she could still feel the vibrations.

Now, an hour on, they hiked through darker tunnels where the coal had been carved out by pickaxe and sweat, unassisted by the percussive coal-cutters and compressed air turbines of the current age. Here, decaying wooden frameworks buckled under the strain. Old limestone dust crunched underfoot on the roadways, laid out to inhibit coal-dust explosions. Shale and trash lined the pathway. Rosalind saw empty food packets and tins that looked early Victorian. They were now deep into a pillaged wasteland long since abandoned by the grandfathers of today's miners; the gaping wounds between the rock layers were all that remained.

Rosalind was not tall, but these older tunnels made her walk with even more of a stoop, swinging her arms to keep her forward momentum. She could stand upright only in the areas where the roof had already fallen in, allowing her a modicum of physical relief but no reassurance. Several times they had to sidestep boulders of many tons that blocked their way; twice they even had to retrace their steps and cross to the parallel tunnel due to massive collapse that they could not pass.

"Shouldn't be goin' this way," said Peter. "Look at all this crap. Look at the supports. They're knackered. In't safe."

"What's right often in't what's easy or nice. Come with me or I'll tell Clegg you left me to go alone." Rosalind kept walking.

"Mam?"

"Don't call me that."

"You've to be thinkin' of the air, too. Away from the ventilated areas, there's bad air. There's firedamp, and that's explosive, mostly, um—"

"Methane," she said, recalling Clegg.

"Aye. And whitedamp, which is poisonous but won't burn, and blackdamp, which is poisonous too. And you cain't smell 'un. The only one you can smell is stinkdamp, and that's rotten eggs. The others will put you under right quick but you'll not even know they're there."

"And that's why we're carrying safety lamps," said Rosalind impatiently.

"Aye, but once we're in it we might not have the breath to get out. Just keel over and die."

"That in't what happens today. I keep tellin' you."

"Well, then, mam, what *does* happen?"

Short of breath and temper, Rosalind raised her hand to cuff the boy, then dropped it to her side again.

"Damn, Peter," she said.

One of the crosses Rosalind bore was her inability to lie. Besides, if she was asking this randomly-chosen boy to walk into danger with her, he deserved to know why.

"What *happens today*," she said, "is that I win and we live."

"And you know how?"

“Not exactly, doesn’t matter.”

“But how can that *be*?” said Peter obstinately, though it was hard for him to be resolute while hopping sideways, the only way he could confront her while she strode on at such a pace. “Mam, how? All this talk, this Cunning, how does it *work*?”

“You already think I’m nutty as a, what, rabbit?”

“Shouldn’t I?”

“How well do *you* remember last week?” she snapped.

“Nothin’ happened last week!”

“Really? Well then, I see next week about as clearly as you remember last week. Next month, as well as last month. It’s glimmers through shadow, Peter. When you search your memory, d’you see every last detail? Can you even recall exactly what you saw fifteen minutes back? ‘Course not. Well, that’s how it is with me.”

Relenting, Rosalind lowered her voice. “It in’t set out plain, like a map. I can see images if I choose. I just have to twist my head in a certain way, a way you can’t see, because I’m lookin’ in a direction you can’t turn towards. But I have to know what I’m lookin’ for. It’s like you, needing to know what questions to ask before you can get a sensible answer.”

“Well, aye,” said Peter fervently. “I understand *that* right enough.”

Rosalind counted to ten. “You’ll just have to trust me. As it is I’ve told you more than I’ve told any other living soul.”

“Only says you’re tight with words.” Peter sucked down a breath and glanced again at the lamp’s robust flame for reassurance. “Look, mam, I just want to know what’s really going on. I don’t even mean the future. Just the *now*. Jack-the-flippin’-Lad? What’s he runnin’ from? What’s he afraid of?”

“Jack? Nowt. Certainly not the likes of me.”

“Then he lured you down here to fight wi’ him?”

“Worse than that,” she said. “He wants to talk to me.”

“What?”

“Talk, Peter. If anyone knows about *talk*, it’s you.”

“And you couldn’t have had yer talk up-top?”

“Happen not.”

“But *you* don’t want to talk to *him*.”

Rosalind shrugged. “We can talk. But I’m still goin’ to kill ‘un.”

Peter gaped. “Kill?”

Aye, that was the first time she’d said as much in the boy’s company, damn it. Rosalind strode on. “Yes. Kill.”

“Holy Christ!”

“Don’t be sayin’ words like that.”

He scurried after her. “Why? Why’s this man so important?”

“Why, why?” she mimicked. “Lots of reasons. Because he’s just evil, and wrong, and... sly. And, beyond that... because he killed a friend of mine. Someone I’d known for... ever such a long time.” Peter had inadvertently asked her just the wrong question, and now the words tumbled out of her. “Her name was usually Sally. Often the three of us’d be together, different as chalk and cheese, but still able to laugh around a fire or live round the same village green. And for all our differences, we were still more similar to each other than to—“ She looked at Peter, and fell silent.

“How did Sally die?” he prompted. “How long ago?”

“After Shakespeare,” said Rosalind. “Before Swift.” Peter looked blank, and she went on. “How did he kill her? I don’t even know, and I’d rather not. Even longer ago, we were four. Seth is long gone, and that’s nobody’s fault. But Jack killed Sally dead, right enough. Worse than killed. Snuffed her like a flame. Made her extinct. And I’d known her for so very long.”

“Gosh.”

Rosalind went on, relentless in her explication of the inexplicable. “This’ll be hard for you to get, but here’s trying, Peter. There’s death, and then even worse than death there’s *annihilation*. Know what that is? Ordinary little deaths, like I’ll do to him today, those ain’t the end for people like me and Jack and the others. We’re Recurring; we just get reborn and grow up all over again, but in different bodies. As we become adult it dawns in us who we are and what we have to do, but in the meantime the world is rid of us till we reach our maturity again.

“But Seth and Sally, they’re *annihilated* and dead forever and won’t be back. Jack-the-Lad... well, him and me, hunting and killing each other, it’s just what we have to do now, and we always shall.”

It was far beyond Peter. But he was giving it a valiant try. “You want to see the Cunning of it, Peter? The law?”

“I suppose.”

Rosalind squatted down and marked out a square in the dust of the floor with her finger. “Then look here. Four corners, and one of us for each corner. The top half o’ the square, so these two corners, stands for order, talk, and thought. The bottom half is chaos, action, and instinct. The right side of the square, so these two corners, stands for the future. The left side, for the past. Got all that?”

“Aye,” said Peter dubiously.

She drew an R in the dust by the top right corner. “Here I am, up here, so what’s that then? Talk, order and the future: Life Anticipated, or prophecy. That’s me. Jack-the-Lad, he’s at the opposite corner, bottom left. Action, chaos, and the past: Life Lived and Savored. Sally was here on the bottom right corner, below me, for action and the future. She was a fighter: Life Striven For. And did she ever strive! Oh, Peter, if you’d only met Sally! I can tell you don’t give a toss for me, but if you’d known Sally you’d give up your life to follow her forever. And that’s what men did. Still do, in a way. But, it in’t the same now.”

“Then Seth would be here?”

“Aye, on the last corner, top left, Seth, talking and the past. Order. A bard, a scribe, a record-keeper: Life Understood. He had a rare gift, did Seth, he was the soul and memory of every village and city. But all too soon everyone learned to write and record for themselves, and he became irrelevant and dissipated. You still think I’m crazy, Peter, don’t you?”

She’d caught him with his mouth open and not a clue what might escape from it. Eventually he said, “Don’t know, mam. In’t much sense in this. It’s just a square.”

“And there are many other squares I’ve heard tell of. Other patterns, other Cunnings.” Rosalind stood. “But that’s how ours works, and I think it’s the most basic. Earth, air, fire, water? Well, I’m Air. Sally was Water, Seth was Earth. And Jack, well, Jack is Fire. And that’s all there is to it.”

Peter shook his head.

Rosalind grinned widely, happier than she'd been for years, just for having told the tale. Here was the essence of Life Understood, and for a moment she was keeping true to Seth's memory. "Never mind. Let's just get this done."

"And you're thirty-seven?" said Peter, thoughtfully.

"Aye," said Rosalind. "Ancient."

*

Some time later, Rosalind Theaker became convinced she had been buried in the smoky intestines of the earth and was fated to prowl the hacked-out burrows of the deep forever, like a hapless Greek demigod consigned to eternal torment for some long-forgotten sin. The stooping walk, the endless tripping, the haunting memories of past and future sorrows.... To calm herself she watched Peter's back as he led the way in the flickering light, and listened to the rasp of his breathing.

Ah, the air. The key to her disorientation must be the lack of ventilation, but peering askance Rosalind confirmed for a fact that neither of them would pass out nor suffer lasting harm. It was only air, after all, and wasn't she Air herself?

She rubbed her eyes and looked more closely at their surroundings.

"We're nearly there," she said quietly.

The crudity of these old workings and the wedges of coal left clumsily unremoved told her that they were now about as far back into the history of this colliery as it was possible to reach. Ironically it was more open and spacious here than anywhere else she'd been; the last century's miners had found and worked the tallest seam first, with pick and crowbar, and as they retreated they'd pulled away and mined most of the columns protecting them from collapse, uprooting their last defense against pressure and gravity.

"Nearly?" said Peter, checking the flame in his lamp again. He'd been obsessing about the air for nigh on an hour; the flame had seemed subdued and often flickered but had not changed its color.

Rosalind stood very still. "Wait. I'm wrong. We're well past 'nearly'. This is the place. In't it, Jack? Robin?"

She was answered only by the silence of the grave.

Rosalind began to twist and peek askance, then jumped and shrieked a warning to Peter, but it was too late: a flare went off in front of them, sudden, magnesium-white, brutal to the eyes. Rosalind felt her arm jerked violently aside as her lamp exploded; she yelped and flinched away from the flying glass. At the same time her helmet was lifted from behind and pushed roughly forward over her eyes. Peter tumbled against her other arm, robbing her of her freedom of movement as the strap slid from beneath her chin and the helmet came off.

Both her precious lights, stolen in an instant. As Peter staggered and turned, a second liquid crash marked the demise of his lamp too. Rosalind's next eyeblink opened to the deepest darkness.

She dropped to one knee and clawed at her face, expecting the warm damp of blood and the laceration of embedded glass, but found only her own skin. The lamp had evidently exploded away from her. Jack must be right by her, with a club or a two-by-four.

Damn it.

All this time she'd looked in vain for the manner of the ambush, worried that Jack might explode a charge to bring down the roof and trap them behind rock and rubble. But no, it was simpler than that to render them helpless as fresh-born mice. Here she was,

exiled from light, surrounded by a blackness more total than she'd known for centuries, and she had not predicted the way of it, not in sufficient detail....

Rosalind recalled the shaking of her hand when Clegg had handed her the lit lamp, and her nervous startlement at even the momentary splinters of darkness in the cage and on the long walk. Her instincts had tried to warn her, all right, but she'd not been shrewd enough to read the signs.

She had not foreseen this because there had been literally nothing to see. The very blankness of her premonition should have been the clue.

Jack might be close enough to tackle, if she knew which way to grab. She still gripped the wreckage of the lantern, and it extended her reach a foot and a half. The last shards of its glass were still skittering across the rocky floor as Rosalind swung the safety lamp around her in a heavy arc. She felt its impact -- crack! -- and hurled herself at the obstacle it had found, only to run headlong into a column of packed stone. Gravel pitter-pattered across her scalp. She squawked briefly.

"What the heck you playin' at?" said Jack-the-Lad. "I'm over here."

He had already retreated twenty feet or more: Jack-be-nimble. Even in this pitchy night where the very air had turned to coal, he could run rings around Rosalind.

Not that he was attempting to hide, since next moment he shouted, "Stop that! Little tinker. Be still!" Then came a wail.

"Jack, now! What're you doing to the boy?"

"What, this here? Salty Peter?"

"Ow!" said Peter's voice.

"Don't you be hurting him! Let 'un go."

"Didn't hurt him," said Jolly Jack. "Or leastways, I stopped now. My quarrel in't with him. Crawl away, little scrap, and let the grown-ups have their gossip. And Rosalind, even if he do get hurt, then you must have known he would be, and you chose to bring him anyhow. So you shan't blame *me*."

Peter spat, then he shouted again, this time at Rosalind: "What's this then? I trusted you! You're supposed to be Cunning! Feeding me all that guff, and you didn't see 'un coming?"

"What makes you think I didn't? Hush, now, Peter," she said, irritated.

"I'm nowt to do with this, sir," Peter babbled. "I don't know nothing, please don't do me no harm."

"Oh, do shut up," said Rosalind and Jack together, but it was only Jack who laughed.

"Second time you've denied me, Peter," she said. "Do as Jack says, and be still and quiet till we're done, you hear?"

Peter's whining had covered Rosalind's tippy-toe progress a few feet rightward. She no longer felt the scritch of broken glass underfoot.

"Been such a while since we last met, Jack, and I can't even see you," she said. "In't fair."

"Aw," said Jack. "You live for my smile?"

"I live to see your face after you've died again," she said sweetly.

"Is that what happens today?" he said. "Do you win? Or do I convince you?"

"Of what?"

"Come on, Ros, it'd not change anything, never does, may as well tell me."

"I might lie."

Jack laughed. “You?”

The sound of Jack seemed to come from everywhere and all around. As he spoke she craned her head backward, forward, turned around widdershins, listening for how these small shifts changed the timbre of his voice. Dreamily and almost without conscious thought, Rosalind began to acquire a sense of his position from the invisible patterns he imposed upon the air.

This was the nub of the difference between them: Rosalind could always impose order upon her surroundings. She could turn any stark set of arbitrary events into a story with a beginning and an end. The why and the how were easy for her, the what and wherefore often harder. For his part, Jack was the Midas of madness. Anything he touched turned to chaos, and the current mess was a perfect example.

“Well, hurry up then, convince me,” said Rosalind. “Why bring me to this pit, Jack? What’s the point?”

“Would *you* believe *me*?”

She took another step rightwards. Her searching hand found another rock pillar, and Jack’s voice changed, as if she was now hearing him round corners. Now there was something in the way. But Jack was moving too, slowly, and in a few moments she heard him directly again.

Rosalind had spent entire lifetimes blind. Even so, this would be hellish hard.

Said she: “For someone who wants to talk, you ain’t sayin’ much.”

“Well, I’m listening to you creep around. It’s funny. But, all right; I lured you here to get you away from the whispering of your damned Fey friends, Vervain and all, your so-called allies, though none of ‘em will come down here with you, will they? Down here I don’t hear the trees, and you don’t see the future so well, eh? Down here I think maybe you ain’t so privy to what’s goin’ to happen. Especially with the lights out. You’re a seer who can’t see. Whereas me, I’m Jack-of-the-dark, Jack-of-the-dead. So *mine*’s the advantage, to make a bad pun.” He cackled, Puck-like. “But Ros, that in’t the best of it. Crux is: down here, we can choose what we want to be for our own selves.”

“What?” said Rosalind. “What?”

Jack-the-Lad had stopped moving. She hadn’t.

“Those blinking Fey, enemies of knowledge, ephemera made eternal. If it were up to them, they’d like nowt better than to keep us repeating this stupid cycle for ever and ever. ‘Cause then we’re not paying attention to *them* and their little schemes. If they can focus us on each other, it distracts us from what else we could be doing. Is that what we want? The Fey making our choices for us?” He’d started creeping sideways again.

“Not getting your drift, Jack. Down here’s not your land. And we’ve no choice but to be what we are.”

She heard a faint scuff-sound maybe fifteen feet away. Probably he thought that moving made him harder to track, but in reality he was mapping out the lay of the land for her. It was like playing chess with her eyes closed, coming in halfway through the game; figuring out where the pieces were from the moves made, the moves avoided. Tricky to do that and also concentrate on the scrambled logic spilling from the mouth of the Puck.

“Oh, everything around us belongs to me in a way, eh? Coal, the past, the ancient fossils of dead trees. Well, you and me are ancient too, Rosalind, or the idea of us is anyway, which is a matter I’ll address soon if you don’t get the jump on me. Fact is, this *is* my land. You should know that already, being the queen of divination, but you only see

what you want to see, and that's your flaw. Kept in caves with the big snake. Cassandra, Delphi, Mother Shipton. Eternal mysteries. No wonder you're batty."

Rosalind snorted. "They're long dead."

"But you and me, we're no mystery," said Jack. "No mist around us. We're *archetypes*, is what. Carl Gustav Jung? Archetypes? We're products of the collective unconscious, of the thoughts of all humanity made whole and pushed into flesh. We stand for things, you and me. Different things, opposites, but where it really counts, we're the same."

"What?" said Rosalind. "Young? Collective?"

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"For a Cunning Woman, you're not very well-read," said Jack. "You claim to know the future, but you're all mired in the past. You need to keep up."

"That's *Jung*, with a 'J'. Don't know him? Too new? Well then, how's about Freud, "The Interpretation of Dreams", condensation, displacement? Another view into our dark spooky fossil brains. Or Saussure maybe: the signifier and the signified? You and I are the signifiers, made flesh. In your case the signified qualities are order, prediction, sureness, and boredom. In my case it's chaos, change, and being deeply fascinating. And Rosalind, do cut it out, this tryin' to sneak up on me while I talk, because for that you'd have to be less... predictable."

Jack's voice had jumped off backward, ten feet or more. Damn.

The bitter dark made her eyes hurt. At least there was no air movement to provide an additional distraction. She bent to pick up a stone and lobbed it towards him. It clattered close by him and she heard him take a quick step leftward. Aha.

"Givin' you a chance, Jack," she said. "You wanted to talk. I thought you'd make more sense, but I'd forgotten how you are."

"Nay. You're just not listenin'. Alright then, how about Dirac and quantum mechanics? Energy states, making something from nothing? Good Christ, you haven't a lick of sense about any of this, do you?"

"You capering Jackanapes," said Rosalind. "I came to bury you, not talk philosophy."

"Look around you, we're buried already! All right, listen, here it is, tied up with a red ribbon: *we don't matter anymore*. We used to guide their thoughts. They used to need us. But they're shrewd now, intelligent, capable of managing their own lives, sharper brains, tighter thinking, not the gullible scaredies of centuries past. And they've dragged us out into the cold light. We're anachronisms, and we have no power over them anymore."

"Yet here we are," she said.

"Oh, we're still *made*. They can't help but create us. They force us into being, whether they will or no. We're deep shouts from old brains, mixed and stirred up from their most ancient beliefs. But for all that, we're just echoes. Archaic. Wishes made flesh."

"So where does that leave us? I'll tell you where, Ros. Vestigial. Irrelevant. And so this continuous fighting in different bodies for centuries is pointless too."

"Aye," she said.

"We're part of them. And now they know that, now they don't shrink away from every bump in the night, our power is broken. What was deep is now shallow. And that leaves us just ourselves. Which means we can choose what we want to be. We can choose not to kill each other."

Jack paused. "D'you understand, Rosalind? D'you understand?"

“Aye,” she said again. “But it’s a pity you didn’t think of all this *before* you killed Sally.”

A long silence descended before Jack said, aggrieved, “This is still about *that*?” Jaggedly she replied, “You thought I’d just *forget*?”

“Sally would have gone and died anyway. Look around you. *Where are the warriors now*? Nope, I snuffed out an idea that was already dead. Like I should’ve done with Seth, and ended him with dignity instead of letting him weaken and dribble away alone. But forgive and forget, eh? Don’t you want to put all that behind us? Be normal people again?” He took a breath. “Perhaps even be together?”

She made herself hesitate. “Perhaps I do.”

“What’s better, Ros? To see the future but be always looking back? Or to understand the world and look ahead with hope? And pride?”

She remembered the bombs falling into cities, years in the future. “Pride?”

“Yes. Foreknowledge is a curse. Ambiguity, ah, now that’s worth something. I’ll always believe in chance, Rosalind, and in hope, even if they don’t exist. That’s what it means to *live*. You, you miss it all.”

“You’re mad.”

“I used to be. Not any more. Consider what you’re hearing, Rosalind. Me, Jack-the-Lad, Robin Goodfellow as-was, old British prankster, soul of mischief-- talking of science and logic. I’m different. Aren’t I? So, see: *We can change*. Now we know what we truly are, we *must*.”

Rosalind bent for another rock, straightened. “I’d love for us to change, Robin.”

Jack laughed, delighted. “See? Aren’t you glad you came? To be able to say that... Don’t you love it down here? Snug, peaceful, none of the bleedin’ Fey, just us. Down here it’s all so very simple. Don’t you think?”

“Very simple,” said Rosalind.

She hurled the rock and sprinted after it.

“Ooof!” The rock slammed into him, then bounced away across the floor. Next second, Rosalind’s shoulder met Jack’s chest like a pickaxe whacking into the coalface. Jack was half-twisted away from the pain of the rock, wherever it had struck him, and off-balance enough to stagger, but he managed to grab her shoulders and stay upright. Rosalind ducked down and yanked his knee forward, kicking out at his other ankle, and over they went, arse over tip in a slag heap of thrashing archetypes.

Rosalind’s palm met Jack’s face and jolted it backward, wrenching his neck. (“Sweet Jack,” she sobbed.) The blade in her other hand pierced his chest but she snatched it back out of him, fearing it would jam in a rib, and instead slid it deep into his stomach. Letting go his head, she wriggled clear so he could fold in two around the gut-wound.

Jack curled up with a short desperate scream, and Rosalind followed, planting her knee on his neck. She was ready to defend herself against further attack but his hands were clamped firmly over his stomach to hold himself in, and the untidy battle was already over. He hadn’t even landed a blow on her.

“Jolly Jack...”

The warm smell of his sweat reached out to her. There were times when they’d been lovers, which Jack had called Chaos cleaving into Order, and Rosalind had thought of as Order engulfing Chaos. Often they had wrestled to be the one on top, to make their case; the sexual politics of the Recurring.

Of course, neither of them had been bleeding to death at such times.

A crash and a bump, as Peter came running pell-mell through the darkness and tumbled over them both, hands questing, ready to help, ready to hit. His hand tangled in Rosalind's hair. "Peter, stop!" she shouted. "That's me, Jack's down, it's done. Get us a light!"

"What? How?" he cried.

Jack was mad, but not stupid. He must have planned for this. Rosalind felt his pockets and found a switchblade Jack hadn't even drawn, and a box that slid open. She pulled out the linen that Jack had stuffed in to muffle it, and it rattled. "Matches," she said, pushing them at Peter. "Use 'em to find Jack's lamp. He must have had one and set it aside."

Beneath her Jack whimpered and thrashed, ever more feebly. "Turned the tables on us," he gasped. "No longer a truth. Glimpsed. In shadow. Around the camp fire."

"Hush," she said.

"In the future," said Jack, "they will mass produce us."

The life ebbed from him now; he was dwindling for loss of it, and she knew he could not rise up and attack her again before the end. She crept down and wrapped her arms around him. "Sweet Jack. Don't talk."

He caressed her arm. "The Fey. Using you."

"I know," she said.

"I'm the Jack. You're the queen. Go and kill the king."

"Shhh." Tears poured down her cheeks now.

"At least... I lived. You... miss it all."

"I love you," she said, as the breath rattled from his throat and his body gave him up with a little sigh.

Yellow flame fizzed, vanished. "Ha," said Peter. His second match held good; after the utter darkness, it shone like a miniature sun. In the valuable moments before it faded Peter said "Hey!" with good cheer, and set off across the gallery. She heard him clicking the igniter, and within moments they were bathed in the safety lantern's cool glow.

Rosalind squinted down at Jack. His face was ordinary, bland. She did not recognize him. She had known him forever.

When she closed his eyes, her hand did not shake.

"You *killed* 'un," said Peter, marveling, horrified, scooting up close.

"As foretold."

Fascinated, the boy reached out to touch the corpse. It was a compulsion she'd seen before. "Quit that, now! Show respect."

Peter froze, suddenly wary. "You be usin' that again?"

Rosalind was wiping her knife clean on Jack's shirt, returning his blood to him. "I just might," she said, but before the boy could panic, added "Nay, not on you, Peter! You've nowt for brains if you believe that."

"I seen what you done here. I'm the only witness. You'll be for stabbin' me too, now, I'll be bound." But he met her eye calmly. Almost as if he were daring her to do it.

"Third time you've denied me," she said. "Listen, Peter; I can't lie. So when Clegg asks, you pipe up and say we didn't find Jack. Searched everywhere, but all for naught. Better that way. See?"

She watched him think about it. She didn't already know his answer, hadn't looked for it. But she could guess. He'd tried to aid her in the fight. A minute late and tuppence short, but he'd had a go. And his third denial had been strong, with little trace of the timidity he'd shown earlier. This dark day was stiffening Peter's spine.

Of course, his newfound strength would ultimately be the death of him.

"It weren't murder," she said quietly, to help him think. "Not hardly, when you stand up to someone bigger. Self-defense. Him or me. And if Jolly Jack had taken me down, d'ye think he'd have let *you* go?"

What's right often in't what's easy or nice. She didn't say it again, but the living words still drifted around them in the dusty, scant air.

"Aye," said Peter suddenly. "All right, then."

Rosalind rested her fingers in Jack's blood and touched it lightly to the skin over her heart.

"Jack said you couldn't see the future, down here."

Rosalind turned askance, a quick motion of her head in that direction Peter could not see. She saw the knife in her hand once more, the unexpected toughness of Vervain's skin, the terrible spray of bright Fey blood, his comical surprise.

After she killed the king, no Fey would ever help her again. But she didn't want their help anymore. Time to stand on her own two archetypal feet.

War was coming. She'd have to face it with no distraction. Doomed to live on as they all died around her.

"Jack was wrong." Rosalind tucked the knife back into her boot. "You heard 'un. Nowt he says makes sense."

Peter touched her arm. "When do I die?"

"What?"

"I want to know," he said. "Then at least I'll be able to count on that long."

"No."

Peter leaned forward and rested his other hand on Jack's shoulder, linking them all. Absorbing the experience of Life Lived and Savored, even as Jack's skin cooled. Taking strength from Life Anticipated. Not backing away from the horror. Just as he would not back down when his own turn came.

"You *are* older than you look," she said.

"Aye," he said. "And I've asked, and now you got to tell me, and not lie. In't that how it works?"

"No...." She felt nauseous, but his hand still gripped her arm, and the urge to prophesy was almost irresistible.

"Then tell me I'm not poor!" he said. "Those crippled old sods, scrabblin' on the slag heaps for little crappy bits of coal, is that me? Do I die like that?"

"Peter...."

"You got to tell me."

The breath clamped in her throat as she twisted askance. There was Peter, downstream: in his fifties, jaundiced and aggressive. There were the police, with their clubs and their ferocity. It was the same death in the same future, but it looked different now.

Rosalind saw a Peter doing what was right, fueled by the fires of conviction. A strong man full of righteous fury.

Not at all like the pit-tramps, grubbing for tiny chips of energy on a mountain of ash.

"Tell me!"

The future changed, she thought.

But that was wrong. The future was always the same. *She* was different. Not the impossible, warping change Jack sought in her, but an alteration nonetheless.

“The slag heap?” said Rosalind. “Nay, that’s not your death. You die fighting, Peter, and your cause is good. You die rich. Richer than most men.” She sucked down a ragged breath. “Richer than me.”

“Richer than Jack?”

It was an odd question. Rosalind looked down one final time on Jack-the-Lad, lying as inert and peaceful as coal. A fossil himself, doomed to rest here amid the exhausted seams of history, his passing unmarked.

“Oh, aye. Richer than that ’un, by far.”

“Good,” said Peter, standing up. “Good. Well, come on then.”

“You’re Sally’s after all,” she said, realizing.

Again, Jack had died with lies warm upon his tongue, his lips frothing with chaos. He was mad; she, cursed. Yet she was alive, so who was the fool now?

You miss it all.

During that weaving of the blackness into a pattern, Rosalind had felt close to some deeper insight, perhaps about herself and her nature, or the ultimate meaning of the Recurring. One last twist of Cunning and it might have been hers. But it had eluded her. Whatever understanding she might one day glean from her many lifetimes, it would not happen today.

Perhaps she had won too easily. Again.

“I’ll stay a while,” she said.

“Nay, you won’t,” said Peter sternly. “Get up. Up!”

Tears flooded her eyes as Rosalind stood, turning her back on Jack and on the past. “All right. I’m coming. Get along wi’ you, lead the way,” and fell in step behind Peter, the boy and the man; followed him, stumbling blindly, into a future bright as fire.