BONES

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This is a true story, more or less. In the history books, you can find Dr. John Hunter, a noted surgeon and naturalist. London's Royal College of Surgeons maintains his museum, an amazing collection of eighteenth-century oddities and natural curiosities.

Charlie Bryne is in the history books, too. He came to London from Ireland in 1782. Advertised as the World's Tallest Man and the Descendant of Irish Kings, he exhibited himself as a curiosity and a freak.

The history books tell of their meeting—but now I'm getting ahead of myself. I must start long before that.

On a cold winter evening, when the ground was white with frost, Charlie Bryne sat on a stool by the peat fire. Though the boy was only ten years old, he was already as tall as a grown man. His mother, a youthful widow, sat close by, her shawl pulled up around her shoulders and a glass of whiskey in her hand. The firelight shone on her face, making her cheeks rosy and her eyes bright.

"Tell me the story, Mum," Charlie asked. "Tell me how I got to be so big."

She smiled at him fondly. "Ah, you know the tale as well as I do, Charlie. You have no need forme to tell it."

"I've forgotten. Tell me again," he pleaded.

"All right—just once more. Fill my glass and we'll have the story." He refilled her glass from the jug and she settled herself more comfortably in her chair.

"It was a year after a young horse threw my husband and broke his back," she began. "I was a widow with a fine farm, and many a bachelor farmer would gladly have had me to wife. But I was happy to be on my lone, and I would have none of them." She pushed back her dark hair with her hand, smiling at the memory. "Old Sean Dermot died that autumn, and I went to the wake. As it came about, I stayed too late, and I was walking home after dark. 'Twas a lonesome road I had to travel—I was tired, so I took a short cut, the path that ran beside the Giant's Boneyard."

She shook her head at her own foolishness. The Giant's Boneyard was a lonely, haunted spot. In a field too rocky for planting, wild grasses grew thick and green around great boulders of unusual shapes. People said that the boulders were the bones of a giant, a king of Ireland who had died a hundred years before, while fighting to protect his people from invaders. Some said that he had promised, with his dying words, to return if ever Ireland needed him. Some said he walked at night, strolling through the field that held his bones. In any case, most people avoided the

place after dark.

"The moon was a sliver in the sky, hanging low and giving just enough light for me to see. I was only halfway across the field when I saw a blue light, a beautiful light, the color of the Blessed Virgin's robes. I was not foolish enough to go running after fairy lanterns. I kept to the path, hurrying home, but the light danced across the field toward me. And then I saw it clearly."

She clasped her hands before her, and leaned toward Charlie. He caught his breath, watching her. "The blue light shone from a golden crown on the head of an enormous man. A powerful man—stronger than the blacksmith in the village, taller than the tallest I had ever seen. He was handsome, but his eyes were dark and fierce. When he looked at me, I froze, bound to the spot and unable to run."

She fixed her gaze on Charlie, as if to show him how it felt, and he shivered. "He spoke to me sweetly, saying that I would bear him a son. His son would have the old blood in his veins, and he would save Ireland. Then he took me by the hand and let me to a spot where the grass was soft. There he lay with me, taking his pleasure as a man does with a woman. In the morning, I woke with the sun in my eyes, beside the boulder they call the Giant's Skull." She leaned back in her chair. "Nine months later, you were born. You were the biggest baby the midwife had ever laid her eyes upon. And you've kept growing ever since. You take after your father, sure enough."

Charlie nodded, gazing into the fire. "Have you ever seen my father again?"

"That I have not," she murmured. "But I know you for his son."

"Then I must save Ireland? When must I do this?"

"That I don't know. When the time comes, surely it will be clear to you."

Charlie frowned at the fire, his expression fierce. "I will do what I must do," he said. "If only I can figure out what that is."

Charlie wasn't his mother's son, though he sat at her knee and fetched her whiskey. He was a child of the woods and the wild fields—growing up outdoors as much as in. Summer and winter alike, he ran barefoot, coming home to his mother's house with dusty feet and brambles in his hair.

He was a strange lad—with a peculiar, dreamy air about him that made some think he was dim-witted. But he wasn't stupid—he just paid attention to other lessons. Reading and writing seemed unimportant when he could look out the window and see the flowers growing in the fields, hear the birds singing. He understood the mathematics of bird nests, the poetry of cloud formations, the penmanship of snail tracks left on the cold stones of the churchyard wall.

He had a way about him. Animals liked him: the wildest horse would consent to be shod when Charlie held its head. Cows bore their calves more easily if he were standing by. Over the years, the widow Bryne's farm prospered: her fields were fertile and her hens laid more eggs than any in the village. Her cows gave the richest milk and bore their calves with never a bit of trouble.

Charlie lived with his mother, helping to tend her prospering farm. When he was just sixteen, he was taller than the tallest man in the county. At twenty, he measured eight-foot-tall, and he was still growing. And always he wondered when he would be called upon to save Ireland.

One sunny day, he was drowsing in the Giant's Boneyard, his back against the boulder known as the Giant's Skull. Leaning against the sunwarmed surface, he listened to the wind in the grass and the high thin peeping of the little birds that searched for seeds in the meadow. A lark flew from the grass and came to perch on the boulder. When Charlie held out his hand, the bird flew to him. With one finger, he gently rubbed the bird's head. When Charlie stopped his petting, the lark tilted back its head, sang a liquid trill, then pushed off his finger and took flight.

Charlie watched the bird fly, then plucked a blade of grass from a clump beside him and chewed on the sweet stem. The earth beneath him was warm; the sun shone on his face. He belonged in this meadow the way the boulders belonged. It seemed to him sometimes that he should stay here always, letting the grass grow over him, its roots tickling the surface of his skin as it tickled the granite boulders.

The wind carried the sound of voices. Some neighboring farmers had stopped their work in a nearby field to have a bit of lunch. Their deep voices blended with the distant songbirds and the humming of bees in the wildflowers. Charlie let the sounds wash over him.

"Patrick's gone to England," said one man. Charlie recognized the voice of Mick, an elderly farmer. Patrick was his oldest son. "He said he'll come home rich or not at all."

"Not at all, more than likely," muttered his companion. John, Charlie guessed from the voice—another neighbor. "Have you ever known a young lad to come home? My wife has borne me five strong sons. The Lord took two of them, and they are happy with the angels in heaven. But the other three are in England. I think the ones that are with the angels are more likely to come home than the ones that are in London."

"Aye, that's God's truth," Mick agreed sadly. "I've never known a one to come home to till his father's farm."

A pause, punctuated by the gurgling of beer pouring from the jug.

"Every night, as I go to sleep, I wonder who will till this land when I'm gone," John said softly. "'Tis not such a large plot—barely enough to feed us—but it was my father's farm and his father's before him. John stopped talking long enough to take a draught of beer, then continued. "'Tis a sad thing when a man who has raised five sons has no one to help him with the plowing."

"It ain't right," Mick said. "It ain't right that the best of our children run away to England, never to return."

John laughed, a dry humorless sound. "Aye, we need to protect ourselves. The blasted English have given up fighting with swords. Instead they lure the children away with sweet promises and gold. Treacherous bastards."

"Aye," Mick agreed sadly. "That they are."

The men were silent for a moment, and then John spoke again. "I see you looking over there at those boulders. Old stories won't help you now."

Mick's voice was soft. "I think sometimes about the old king, rising up from his bones. If he were to come before us, I'd tell him to bring the children home. Go to London and bring our sons and daughters back to us."

John snorted. "If you're looking for magic to save you, you're more foolish than I thought. There's no magic there—-just boulders and tall green grass. The magic faded long ago."

Charlie frowned. John was an unhappy man—bitter, tired, dried up as the land he cultivated. Charlie understood why all his sons left and why all his daughters married young.

"Ah, well," Mick said. "All the wishing in the world won't till the field. I think we'd best get back to work."

The voices faded, leaving only the humming of the bees and the wind in the grasses. Charlie tilted his head to the sun and thought.

Thinking made Charlie uneasy. But he could not help considering Mick's words. For some time, he had felt that something was wrong, an uneasy and uncomfortable sensation in his belly. He had watched his neighbors' sons and daughters leave their fathers' rocky farms and go to England, saying they would return. The land called out to them, wishing them back again, but they did not come back. And he dreamed of a day when the children were all gone; old men and women tilled farms, weeping for their sons and daughters who had run away, never to return.

Maybe he fell asleep in the sun. Without being aware of it, he may have quietly slipped over the thin line between sleep and wakefulness, lying there in the grass. The sun was low in the sky and the boulders cast long shadows across the meadow.

He heard footsteps and looked up. A tall man wearing a crown regarded him sadly. Charlie scrambled to his feet. He recognized his father, though the man did not entirely match his mother's description. The King's eyes were not fierce, but mournful and sad. He wasn't really handsome: his face was broad and pleasant, rather like Charlie's own. His gray beard was touched with green, as if strands of moss grew among the hairs. He wore armor made of tarnished metal plate, joined by strips of leather, and small, soft-petaled flowers sprouted among the lacings. His crown gave off a weak blue light, like the strange fluorescence that glows from rotting wood.

The king sat down heavily on a nearby boulder. "Your turn has come, my son," he said. His tone was melancholy; his voice, a soft rumble. "You must go to England and bring the sons and daughters of Ireland home."

Charlie nodded eagerly. "I know," he said eagerly. "I'll bring them home."

The king stared at the ground. "There is still magic here, though some do not have eyes to see it." He studied Charlie. "You must come back to this place, when your

task is done. You belong here. You are part of the magic and power. This is the place where you must die and be buried."

Charlie frowned. He saw no need to talk about what would happen when he died. He was young and strong and eager to do what his father wanted. "Yes, yes," he said. "I understand."

The king reached for the scabbard that hung at his side and pulled out a sword. It was as tarnished as the armor, but jewels gleamed on its hilt. "Here is my sword. Perhaps it will help you." He looked at the weapon doubtfully. "It was my father's before me, and it still has some magic in it."

Charlie took hold of the hilt and bowed to his father clumsily.

It was dark when Charlie woke. The grass was damp with dew, and where the sword had been was a plain straight staff of hawthorn wood. When Charlie picked it up, white blossoms and green shoots sprouted from the dry wood, as if spring had come in the space of a minute. Charlie frowned and brushed the blossoms away but they sprouted again. At last, he gave up and left them be, carrying a staff adorned with small white flowers that smelled of spring.

Every August, not far from Dublin, farmers gathered at the Donnybrook Fair to race horses, sell cattle, drink whiskey, and get into fights. That year, on the last day of the fair, the sky was gray and a misty rain was falling. The hardpacked soil of the fairground was slick and muddy.

Joe Vance hunched his shoulders against the dampness and pushed through the crowd, making his way down the aisle of hastily constructed booths and sagging tents. The countrypeople seemed oblivious to the rain: they were playing pitch-and-toss, gawking at the Punch and Judy show, listening to the hideous wail of the organ grinder's instrument and laughing at the antics of his flea-bitten monkey.

Vance had spent the morning trying to entice passing farmers into a simple sporting game. He had three shells and a dried pea: to win, a farmer had only to guess which shell hid the pea. But the crowd had been reluctant to play. For five hours, Vance had been sitting in the drizzle and calling to the crowd without a penny to show for it. Vance suspected that some other thimble rigger must have passed through recently, and the locals were wise to the trick. All in all, Vance was sick of the country and eager to return to London, where a sharp had a chance to earn a guinea or two.

Vance was almost to the end of the aisle when he saw a clump of people gathered around a young man. The young man seemed to be standing on a box; he towered over the tallest man in the crowd. On his shoulder, a meadowlark perched, looking just as calm as you please. As Vance watched, the small bird tipped back his head and sang a high sweet trill, followed by a glorious burst of song. The liquid notes cut through the babble of the crowd and the wailing of the organ.

"Is the bloody bird tame?" Vance asked a man in the crowd, but the man shrugged. Vance pushed his way closer. He had seen caged finches fetch a pretty

penny among the London gentry, and they did nothing but chirp and flutter. A man might turn a profit if he had a supply of tame larks.

Just as Vance reached the front of the crowd, the bird finished its song and took flight. The young man on whose shoulder it had perched smiled after it and took a step, as if to follow. With a shock, Vance realized that the man was not standing on a box at all. With his bare feet planted firmly on the muddy earth, he stood at least two feet taller than any other man in the crowd. He was a country lad, dressed in rough homespun cloth that was marked with the dust of the road. In one hand, he held a wooden staff that was decorated with white flowers.

Vance forgot the lark and the hope of profits that had flown with the bird. "God save me, man—how bloody tall are you?" Vance asked, staring up.

The young man glanced down at Vance and shrugged. "Tallest in County Derry."

"Tallest I've ever laid eyes on," Vance said. "How old are you?"

"Twenty years this summer."

"Bloody remarkable," Vance muttered. He squinted, measuring the man with his eyes. Londoners were always willing to pay to see a curiosity. "Must be eight feet tall, if you're an inch. What's your name, lad?"

"Charlie Bryne."

"My name's Joe Vance, Charlie, and I'm pleased to meet you. You're a likely lad, Charlie, a very likely lad. I must confess, I've never met a one like you before. A marvel in your own right."

Charlie's eyes were a brilliant innocent blue, as pale and clear as the summer sky. "Where are you from?" he asked.

"From London, the finest city in all the world."

Charlie studied Vance. "Tell me—are there many Irishmen in London?"

"Irishmen? Why I'd wager half a crown that there are more Irishmen in St. Giles Rookery than in all of County Derry," Vance said enthusiastically. "You'd never be homesick in London."

Charlie's face was guileless, the sweet face of a fool. "I want to go to London," he said.

Vance smiled at the way that fate was playing into his hands. His luck, it seemed, had finally turned. "I knew it when I laid eyes on you, Charlie. I knew you for a man with a spirit of adventure, an itching to see the world. And you're in luck, Charlie, tremendous luck." Vance moved closer, reaching up to place a hand on Charlie's shoulder. "I'll take you there, lad. You see, I'm a manager. I find people with special talents, and I help 'em along. Groom 'em, so to speak. Back in London, I managed Bruisin' Peg. You may have heard of her?"

Charlie shook his head.

"Best lady prize fighter in all London. When Peg was in the ring, you could hear

the screaming for miles around. Pity she had to retire." Vance felt it unnecessary to mention that her decision to retire had been precipitated by a broken leg and a clout on the ear that had left her half deaf. He had abandoned her in a low London boarding house, with enough money to pay a week's rent. It had seemed like an opportune time to leave town with the rest of the profits. "I'll take you to London, lad," Vance continued. "It'll be a wonderful opportunity for you, a wonderful opportunity."

And so it happened that Charlie came to be on board a bluff-bowed brig that sailed from Dublin to England. Late at night, on the first night of the crossing, Tom Dorland was on deck, having been awakened by the lice that infested his bedding and clothes. He strolled in the open air, grateful that the cold and the motion had quieted the insects, but knowing that they would rouse again if he returned to his narrow bunk.

A half-moon, high in the sky, illuminated the deck, casting a silver light on the boxes and barrels and bundles that were lashed to the railings. The wind had died and the ship was barely moving through the water. Tom leaned on the railing, staring out to sea.

"'Tis a pleasant evening," a deep voice said from the shadows beside a large box.

Tom glanced toward the voice, frowning into the shadows. "Seems a chilly night to be sleeping out in the air," he said.

"Too many people in the cabin," the man said.

Tom nodded. The passenger's cabin was a dank shelter on the foredeck. When the ship was fully booked, as it was for this passage, the small space became impossibly crowded.

"How long will it take to reach London?" the man asked.

Tom looked up at the stars. "We could be on the sea for days unless we get a wind."

"Ah," the man in the shadows said. "Is that so?" Tom heard the creaking of the deck and saw a large shadow detach itself from the others. A very large shadow—the man was taller than Tom by more than two feet. Tom stared up at the giant—another crewman had told him of the tall man who had come aboard as a passenger, but Tom had assumed that the other sailor's talk was exaggerated.

"You're a big 'un," Tom managed at last.

"I'm my father's son," the giant said, leaning on the railing beside Tom. The big man shook his head, staring out at the calm waters. "I have urgent business in London."

Tom shrugged. "If you want to get there quickly, you have my blessing," he said disrespectfully. "Call up a wind and blow us there in a hurry."

The giant did not take offense at Tom's tone. "A wind," he mused. "A wind to

blow us away from Ireland." He moved his hand and Tom noticed, for the first time, the staff he carried. The giant frowned at it, then waved it tentatively out over the rail, swinging it in a circle. A breath of fresh wind puffed against Tom's face. The giant waved the staff again, smiling now. The wind filled the sails and gently pushed the ship toward the shore of England.

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London was larger than Charlie had expected. So many people, bustling here and there with their own business to attend to. He would have been lost in a minute without Joe Vance. He followed the little man down narrow winding streets, ducking to avoid the wooden signs that hung over shop doorways. Vance threaded his way through the commotion with ease, dodging coaches and hackneys, pushing past fruit sellers with baskets and barrows, side-stepping odorous puddles of offal and horse dung. Charlie was hard-pressed to keep up. He saw an Irishwoman selling oranges on the street corner, her black shawl wrapped tight about her shoulders to keep off the cold. He wanted to stop and chat with her, but Vance rushed on and Charlie feared he would lose his guide. He noticed a young Irish girl selling flowers. But he could not stop to talk, he had to hurry to follow Vance. People stared at him as he passed, called to their friends and pointed at him.

Vance turned from a narrow street into an even narrower alley. The thin strip of evening sky that showed between the tenements was gray with fog; the air was damp and cool. Laundry, strung between the buildings, hung limp in the still air. A group of boys was playing marbles at the far end of the street. Two pigs slept in a scatter of straw in the gutter. As Charlie passed, the larger animal lifted its head and sniffed the air, its small eyes regarding the giant with a dim sort of recognition.

The alley led to a small courtyard where tall buildings blocked out all but the smallest square of gray sky. Vance stepped into a hallway that reeked of varnish from the caneshop next door and called up the stairs. The woman who came down shrieked when she saw him—a cry of surprise and delight, mixed with a little bit of chiding. "Well, it's Joe Vance, blast your eyes. Where have you been, you no-good scoundrel."

While Vance and the woman talked, Charlie waited in the courtyard, staring up at the patch of sky. He heard them murmuring about someone named Peg, and Vance said "God rest her soul," in an insincere voice. But Charlie paid no attention.

He felt tired and confused. On the ship, he had begun to feel ill at ease, missing the solid warmth of Irish soil beneath his feet. When he had complained to Vance, the little man had attributed the complaint to seasickness and said that the feeling would go away when he reached solid ground again. But the sickness remained, a hollowness in his belly, like the emptiness of hunger without the hunger pains. He wore shoes now—Vance had insisted on that when they reached Dublin—and he longed for the touch of honest soil beneath his feet.

"Charlie, come along, lad. Mary will set us up with the rooms we need," Vance called to him.

Vance seemed familiar with the house. The woman showed them a furnished sitting room and a bedroom that attached to it. The bedroom was dark and cold, but Charlie just shrugged when Vance asked him what he thought. He barely looked at the rooms, knowing that he would not be in London for so very long. He would gather the Irish, and then be on his way. So it was not worth quibbling about the look of the rooms.

Vance engaged the rooms and then hurried Charlie along, saying that they had many things to do that day. They went to a tailor shop and Vance had Charlie measured for a suit of clothes. Then they went to the office of the *Morning Herald* where Vance placed an advertisement and ordered handbills to post. "Make 'em say—'The tallest man in the world,'" Vance told the clerk. "'Eighth wonder of the world.' "

While Vance was talking to the clerk, Charlie stepped outside. He looked down the narrow street. In the distance, he saw the open sky and a spot of green. He left Vance behind, drawn to the greenery.

The River Thames flowed through London, bringing water to the city and carrying away the sewage and refuse. Charlie walked down the street and found himself on steps leading down to the river. A tall tree grew on the river bank, providing a restful spot in the gray stone of the city. In the tree, a bird was singing.

Charlie sat on the stone steps. A seagull landed beside him and cocked its head from side to side, studying him with one yellow eye and then the other. Charlie smiled at the bird, then tilted his head back so that the sun shone on his face. The river water lapped gently against the bottom step, whispering comforting words in a language all its own. He rested there, soaking up the warmth of the sun and feeling a portion of his strength returning to him.

Sean was a mudlark, one of the filthy crew who made their living by scavenging bits of saleable refuse from the mud of the River Thames. When the tide was out, he and his two brothers waded into the dirty water, foraging for bits of rope and old iron to sell to the rag man, or for lumps of coal that their mother could burn.

Sean was seven years old, and he had been mudlarking since he was six. His father, a laborer on the docks, had died after being crushed between two barges. With Sean's father's death, the family had fallen on hard times. His mother did char work when she could get it, and all the children scavenged.

On warm days, it was not so bad to wade in the river: they could clamber from the water and let the sun warm them every now and again. But when the wind blew, there was no comfort for them—just cold mud and cold water and a gray and cheerless sky.

On that sunny day, Sean and his brothers had been both lucky and unlucky. Over by the docks where some men were repairing a ship, they found a dozen copper nails, worth a half-penny for the lot. That was good luck—but bad luck came with it. Sean had stepped on one of the nails, running it deep into his foot. When the sailors

chased them away from the docks, he could scarcely run for the pain. Even now, hours later, his foot throbbed with a hot pain and he hobbled after his brothers, walking on his heel to avoid touching the wound to the mud.

"Look there," David, his oldest brother, called. "By the river steps."

The tallest man Sean had ever seen was lounging in the sun on the stone steps that led down to the water. "Come on," David said. "Let's go talk to him."

The three boys approached cautiously, marveling at the size of the man. Their mother had told them stories of the giants who lived in Ireland in the early days. This man might have emerged from such a story.

Sean was in shallow water just a few yards away from the giant when the man opened his eyes. "Good day, sir," said David, the boldest of the three. "Have you a penny for some poor lads?"

The giant blinked at them. "A penny?" He shook his head. "Not so much as a penny, though Joe Vance says that I will be a wealthy man soon enough."

Encouraged by such an amiable response, Sean stepped closer. "You're very big," he said. "Are you a giant, like the ones in the stories?"

The man nodded. "My father was a giant. I suppose I'm one, too." He held out his hand. "Come up out of the water if you like." He took Sean's hand and lifted him from the water. "There now," he murmured. "Sit down here."

Sean limped up the steps to sit beside the giant. His brothers hung back, gaping at him from the safety of the river. But the giant seemed friendly enough.

"What have you done to your foot?" the giant asked him.

"Stuck it with a nail," Sean said, bending his leg and twisting his foot around so he could examine the wound in the sole. The skin around the puncture had turned a deep purple. The chill of the river water had numbed the foot somewhat, but when Sean tried to wipe the mud away from the wound, he winced at the stabbing pain.

The giant's hand closed over Sean's, engulfing the boy's hand and foot both. "Don't poke at it, lad. Let it be, and perhaps I can help." The giant's hand was warm and it seemed to soothe the pain.

The boy gaped up at the giant. "Are you a doctor?"

The giant shook his head. "Not a doctor. But it seems I sometimes have a healing way about me." He wet his lips. Suddenly, for all his size, he looked as if he were not so much older than Sean. "My father gave me a magic sword," he said softly, jerking his head toward a stout wooden staff that leaned against the steps beside him. "It has a power to it. You can touch it if you like."

Sean reached out and fingered the white blossoms that grew from the wooden shaft.

"Do you come from Ireland?" the giant asked.

Sean shook his head. "My mother came from Ireland. I have never been there."

"Ah," the giant said. "But still you are Irish by blood." He nodded slowly. "I have come to take the Irish back home. You'll be coming with me."

Young as he was, Sean knew the way of the world. He frowned at the giant. "We can't go to Ireland," he said. "We don't have any money for the fare."

The giant studied him solemnly, as if this were the first time that he had thought of the fare. "Bran the Blessed once waded across the water between England and Ireland. He could have carried the Irish home—but he was a bigger giant than I am." He hesitated, frowning. "Maybe we could walk."

Sean shook his head. "We can't walk across the sea."

The giant looked mournful, and Sean cast about in his mind, trying to think of something that might help. "Moses parted the waters," he said. His mother made a practice of telling them stories from the Bible, on nights when she was not too tired. "Maybe you could do that."

The giant studied the Thames. He lifted his staff and waved it at the water, as if pushing it back. "Go back," he rumbled. "Show me some dry land."

The water obeyed sluggishly, drawing back away from the base of the steps to reveal the black muck of the bottom. It stopped a few feet from the steps, and the giant waved again, as if herding a reluctant cow. "Go on now. Move yourself." The water drew back another two feet, forming a smooth green-brown wall that was as smooth and shiny as glass. Sean's brothers stood ankle-deep in the mud, gazing at their own feet in amazement.

"Charlie! Where are you, you blasted Irishman? Charlie!" Hearing an angry voice, the giant lowered his staff. The waters flowed back into place and lapped quietly at the base of the steps. Sean slipped off the steps and returned to the safety of the river. A small man appeared at the top of the steps and shouted again at the sight of the giant. "Where have you been, Charlie?"

"Right here by the river," the giant said with quiet dignity. "Just talking to these lads. They're from Ireland."

Vance glared at Sean and his brothers. "Half the mudlarks in London are Irish," he grumbled. "Come on now, Charlie. We have business to attend to."

"They are my people, Joe. I'll be taking them back to Ireland presently."

Vance nodded impatiently, but softened his tone. "Certainly you will, Charlie. But now we must be going."

Sean watched the giant go. It wasn't until he followed his brothers that he realized that his foot no longer ached. That night, he sat by the fire and searched for the wound. But the sole of his foot was smooth and unblemished, with nary a puncture, a hole, or a scrape.

There are no gardens in Covent Garden. The square that bore that name was in the heart of London's West End, in the shadow of St. Paul's Church and not far

from the decaying tenement houses of a slum inhabited by the Irish. By day, costermongers, people selling fruit and vegetables, filled the square. As they called out their wares, their cries competed with the braying voices of would-be entertainers: a juggler who sent sharp knives dancing through the air, a Welshman who swallowed live mice and snakes, a man with a monkey that danced on its hind legs to the music of a hand-cranked organ, another with a chicken that walked a tightrope.

In nearby Drury Lane, gentlemen wagered on the cockfights. In the coffeehouses, gamblers favored games that depended on the spin of a wheel or the toss of the dice, playing roulette and faro, brag and basset, crimp and hazard and rolypoly. For those gamblers with money to spare at the evening's end, the south side of the square offered Mother Need-ham's and Mother Cole's, well-known among London's brothels.

An Irishwoman named Kathleen had a stall in Covent Garden. Her face was pretty enough—she had even features and her eyes were the color of the ocean caught in a tidepool. But most people didn't notice her eyes or her face. Instead, their gazes lingered on the hump that rose from her back like the pack on a peddler. Kathleen was born with a twist in her back, and with this she made her living.

She read palms and told fortunes. Her stall was not far from Tom King's Coffeehouse where gentlemen gambled, and many a gambler came to touch her hump for luck. Sometimes they asked her if they should gamble that night. She would study their palms and give them advice. "Not tonight, Your Grace. There's a bad look to the moon and the luck is not with you."

"Stick to the wheel. The dice will be against you." Maids, out shopping for fresh fruit, would give her a penny to tell them about handsome young men. "His heart is false, dearie," she told them. "Look elsewhere for your true love."

On a sunny morning, she sat on a stool outside her stall, letting the warmth of the day soak into her bones. The weather had changed from foul to fair, and the changes made her hump ache with a deep abiding pain. She had smeared on a salve that a patterer had claimed would heal any misery, but the ache remained.

Above the cries of farmers hawking their vegetables, she heard a trill of birdsong. She looked to see if someone had caged birds to sell. The man with caged birds and the boys with nests to sell were the first and sometimes the only signs of spring in London.

When she heard the song again, she looked up and saw a songbird perched on the pole that supported her rain cover. He tilted back his head and loosed another sweet song.

"Look there," an appleseller cried. When she looked toward the voice, she saw a man who towered above the rest of the crowd. He wore the garb of a country lad and carried a walking staff decorated with hawthorn blossoms.

"That's right, look sharp, lads," said the small man who walked beside the giant. "My name's Joe Vance and this is Charlie Bryne, the Irish giant, descendant of kings.

I'll wager you've never seen his like before. Tell your friends to come and see him. On display every day except Sunday."

While the small man shouted his pitch, the tall man glanced at the crowd, clearly a little bewildered by all the noise and confusion around him. If it hadn't been for his size, he would have looked like a schoolboy, visiting the big city for the first time.

When Kathleen smiled at him, he smiled genially back. "Good day to you," she called to him. "Would you have your fortune told, Charlie Bryne? No charge for the descendant of kings." Telling his fortune for free would be worth her while, she knew, attracting the crowd's attention to her and bringing her business after he was gone.

He came to her, the crowd moving aside before him like wheat before the wind. "Where in Ireland are you from?" he asked, his voice a deep grumbling that blended with the noise of the crowd.

"My parents came from County Cork," she said. "But I have been in England since I was just a babe."

He held out his hand and she took it. His skin was warm and rough, like a boulder that had been warmed by the sun. The lines on the palm were etched deep, like cracks in a granite boulder.

"Someone is looking for you," she said. "You have a secret he wants."

"I have no secrets," Charlie said.

"Someone wants something you have. There will be pain and sorrow, and you will die far from home."

He shook his head stubbornly. "That cannot be," he rumbled. "I promised my father that I would return to Ireland." He smiled down at her. "I will take you with me."

Vance called to Charlie then, shouting across the crowd. He squeezed Kathleen's hand gently. When he walked off through the crowd, the songbird followed, circling the giant. After he left, Kathleen realized that her hump no longer ached. For a time, she was free of the pain.

The clock on the mantel struck eight and Joe Vance moved into the crowd. "That's the end of today's visiting hours, ladies and gentlemen. Come again tomorrow. The amazing Irish giant will be accepting visits from the gentry from eleven to three and from five to eight each day. Tell your friends."

Charlie stood by the fire and watched the crowd leave the room, glad to see them go. For the past hour, he had answered the same questions over and over: he was twenty years old; he stood eight foot two inches in his stocking feet; his foot was fifteen inches long.

He was uncomfortable in his new suit. The tailor had cut it too tight in the chest and shoulders. Whenever Charlie took a deep breath, the seams threatened to split.

Joe Vance had advised him to breathe shallowly.

Joe Vance sat in one of the chairs by the fire and spilled a handful of coins onto a kerchief that he had spread on the hearth rug. He was counting out Charlie's share: one-quarter of the take. Vance took the rest. He had explained to Charlie that out of his share he took care of all the necessities of business—paying the rent, arranging to have young boys hand out advertisements in the streets and so on.

Firelight reflecting from the coins sparkled in Vance's eyes. He finished counting and pushed a small stack of coins toward Charlie. Charlie picked up the coins and jingled them in his hand.

"There you go, lad—enough money to keep you busy for the night, eh?" Vance grinned at Charlie and slipped the rest of the take into his money pouch. "Now I'll be off—I have business to attend to." He winked at Charlie and hurried off.

In the dark bedroom, Charlie took off his new suit and his new shoes, and put on his comfortable old homespun clothes. The hawthorn flowers that bloomed on his staff perfumed the room with the fresh scent of spring. He took the staff in hand and set out to find the Irish and do his father's bidding.

Night was settling over London as he left his rooms and made his way down the dark alley toward Covent Garden. Here and there, an oil lamp in a doorway illuminated the threshold of a shop. Charlie kept to one side of the narrow street, ducking beneath the hanging wooden shop signs. A few industrious shopkeepers had scattered cobblestones in front of their doorways. The stones, embedded in the hard-packed dirt of the alley, hurt Charlie's bare feet.

The street opened into a square crowded with stalls and people. The air was loud with the cries of sellers: "Chestnut, penny a score!"

"Apples! Fine h'eating apples!"

"Oysters, three for a penny. Fine and fresh. Oysters!"

A candle cast an uncertain light over a vegetable stall. The hot coals of the chestnut seller's stall shone with a hellish glow, painting the passersby as ruddy as devils. The oyster seller's makeshift stall was beneath a streetlamp. The wick in the oil-filled globe cast a puddle of feeble yellow light. The flickering light distorted people's faces, making them look pinched and angry.

Three gentlemen hurried through the square—swell gamblers by the look of them, on their way to a coffeehouse or a bordello. A young girl, no more than eight years old, trotted after them, calling out—"Please, gentlemen, do buy my flowers. Do buy a bunch please." As she passed the oyster seller's stall, the child lost her footing, tripping over a pothole in the street. She bumped into the stall and fell, dropping her flowers and knocking half a dozen shellfish into the street.

She was in the mud, scrambling after her fallen bouquets, when the oyster seller swore and lifted his hand to cuff her. In the flickering light, his face looked frozen and masklike, as if all human feeling had left him.

"Here now," Charlie called out. He stepped between the man and the child. "She

didn't mean you any harm."

The oyster seller glared up at Charlie. "Blasted Irish whelp," he muttered, but he lowered his hand and stepped back, putting his stall between himself and the giant, clearly fearful.

Turning to the little girl, Charlie found her on her knees in the mud, gathering up her flowers. The blossoms were muddy and battered, and the child was weeping as she tried unsuccessfully to brush the filth from the bouquets. He squatted beside her. "Now, lass," he murmured, not knowing what to say. "Come now, don't cry. "

She ignored him, continuing to inspect her flowers through her tears. Charlie studied her a moment, then held out his staff, where the hawthorn flowers still bloomed. "Look here, lass. You can pick a new bouquet right here."

She glanced up and Charlie helped her to her feet. "There's a lass," he said, still holding out his staff. His legs were tired from squatting, and so he plucked the child from the mud and lifted her, supporting her on one arm. He held the staff in his other hand, where she might easily reach the blossoms. "Pick a bouquet," he urged her.

A few passersby, intrigued by Charlie's size, had stopped to watch him argue with the oyster seller. They lingered to watch the girl pluck flowers from the giant's staff. She picked a bunch and bound them together with a dirty bit of string that she pulled from some hidden pocket in the rags that served as her clothes. She picked another bunch, larger than the first. The watching crowd grew larger. Though clearly the staff should have been plucked bare, it was as thick with flowers as ever.

The girl picked a third bunch of flowers, working awkwardly with her right hand while her left arm cradled an enormous bouquet. Her arms were full when the giant set her down, and yet the staff still bore a crown of white blossoms. As the little girl passed among the crowd, selling flowers to people who marveled at how sweet and fresh they were, the crowd watched Charlie expectantly, awaiting his next trick.

"'Tis a miracle," murmured an elderly Irish apple seller. She wore her shawl over her graying hair and clenched a pipe in her teeth.

"It's nothing but a conjurer's trick," said a dapperly dressed young gentleman. "A very clever one, I admit. How do you do it, man?"

Charlie blinked at him, a little confused. "What do you mean?"

"Where did the flowers come from?" the man asked impatiently.

"From the soil of Ireland," Charlie said, giving as honest an answer as he knew how.

The man snorted in disbelief. "They never give away a trick," he said to the lady beside him. Before Charlie could speak again, the man reached out and took the staff from Charlie's hand to examine it. When the staff left Charlie's hand, the flowers wilted. Their petals showered to the ground, like an early snowfall. When Charlie took the staff back, the blossoms returned, fresh flowers opening where no buds had even been visible.

"Trickery," the man said, and pushed away through the crowd, the lady on his arm.

"Let us have another trick," said a lad in the crowd. He was a ragged young man, bold because he was surrounded by his mates, who were as ragged and dirty as he was. "Conjure us something."

Charlie looked around at the crowd, not knowing what to do. "I don't know any tricks. I have come here from Ireland to bring the Irish home."

"Home to Ireland?" The bold lad made a rude sound, and his companions laughed. "I'd sooner go to blazes than go to Ireland."

"But you must go home," Charlie said. "The land, it needs you back."

"The land needs me," one of the lad's companions scoffed. "And what about what I need?"

"The land will give you what you need," Charlie said, confident as could be.

Another of the young men laughed. "I need a fine suit of clothes and a gold watch. Will the land give me that?"

The first lad shouted, "I need a coach and four fine horses. Will the land give me that?"

"I need a house in the country!"

"I need a roast goose for dinner!"

"I need five gold guineas!"

Charlie shouted above them. "These are not the things you need. You don't understand. I have come to take you back where you belong. You must listen to me."

But the crowd would not listen. Their pleasure seemed to border on hysteria: half of them were drunk; the others would like to be. Their laughter was not genuine and easy; it had a frantic edge to it.

"Do not waste yourselves in this foul city where you can't see the sky." Charlie's voice boomed over the babble of the crowd. "Come back to the island where you were born! Come with me!"

"And who are you to tell us what we must do?" shouted the first lad.

"I am my father's son," Charlie bellowed above the noise. "My father was a king. He sent me here."

"A king, you say?" The ragged lad laughed. "King of the beggars!"

Charlie protested, shaking his head. "No, a king of Ireland. He fought and—"

"King of the Vagabonds!" another young man cried.

"King of the Fools!" shouted a third.

"Aye, that is it," cried the first lad, taking up the shout. "King of the Fools! That

is what we have." They surged around him, laughing and pulling at him, like a flock of starlings harrying a raven. "King of the Fools!"

They crowned him with a garland of watercress, snatched from a vegetable seller. They dressed him in a rude cape of flour sacking, grabbed from the protesting baker. They would have done more, but a policeman came to stop the merriment, and the lads left Charlie sitting in the mud not far from Kathleen's stall.

Kathleen found him there when she stepped out to see what all the noise was about. Charlie was leaning against a wall on the edge of the square, the flour sacks around his neck, the garland drooping over one eye. He still clung to his staff.

Kathleen took pity on him, helping him from the mud, taking the garland from his head, using her kerchief to wipe the muck from a cut he had somehow gotten beneath his eye.

"What is it you did, to make those rowdy boys treat you so rudely?" she asked him.

He shook his head, obviously still bewildered by it all. "I only told them I had come to bring them home to Ireland."

Kathleen dabbed at his wound, making exasperated sounds beneath her breath. He was like a big child, he was. "Bring them home to Ireland? You'll have to tie them up and put them in a box for that. They'll not go willingly."

He shivered in the cold of the night fog, shaking his head. "I don't understand these people. This place has changed them. This place makes people hard, scarcely people at all."

She shook her head. "They're people, right enough. People trying to make their way in a hard cruel world."

"'Tis a cold place, London. I have not been warm since I left Ireland," Charlie muttered.

He looked so mournful and hangdog. She cast about for a way to cheer him. "There are ways to warm yourself, Charlie. I'll show you a way out of the cold. We'll stop a bit at the Black Horse Tavern. You'll find more Irish there, right enough."

The Black Horse Tavern was crowded and noisy, ringing with the shouts of drunken young costermongers playing at cards, dice, and dom-inos. A whore who had paused to warm herself with gin was laughing at a bawdy joke; a pimple-faced apprentice stared at her half-exposed breasts and grinned. The air was close with the greasy aroma of roasting mutton.

Kathleen found them a place to sit at a rude wooden table and waved a hand to a serving man. "Gin will warm you," she muttered. "It'll warm you as you've never been warmed before."

The man brought them two glasses of gin, and she sipped at one. The liquor stung her lips and the biting aroma brought tears to her eyes, but it warmed her. A

glass or two, and the pain in her hump would ease, the ache in her bones would subside. The gin was medicinal, she reckoned, and that was why she drank it. "It's a foul drink, but it eases a person," she said to Charlie.

Charlie tasted it gingerly. "It has more of a bite than whiskey," he said. "But it does warm me."

"That it does," she said. She leaned forward, resting her elbows on the table and looking up at Charlie, wondering what to do with him. An overgrown schoolboy, that's what he was. "Why don't you go home, Charlie? Go home to your mother's farm. You don't belong here."

He downed the rest of the glass of gin and shook his head. "My father told me I must bring the Irish home. I cannot go home alone."

Kathleen shook her head. "The Irish will never go home. We all talk of the green hills and how we long for them, but we remember the famines and the hardships as well. We won't go back."

"But you must," he said, his tone urgent. He had another glass of gin, and told her of falling asleep in the Giant's Boneyard. He told her of how his father came to him and told him what to do. "He gave me his sword," Charlie said, gesturing with the staff. "It's a magic thing. On the ship that carried me from Ireland, I waved my staff and a wind came to blow us to England." He leaned forward, his face already flushed from the gin. "And when I waved it over the river, the waters parted, leaving a path of dry land."

Kathleen sipped her gin and listened, watching his broad daft face. He was an innocent and a lunatic, that was clear enough. But she could not help thinking about the stories that her mother had told her when she was a little girl. Legends of giants and heroes and magical swords. Charlie's story began like an old tale—the enchanted son, the magic sword, the quest.

As Charlie talked, he drank gin, downing glass after glass. With each glass his words grew louder and made less sense. He was growing agitated. "And the Irish will follow me to the side of the sea," he said, his voice loud enough to cut through the noise of the tavern. "And I will wave my staff and the waters will part before me." He stood up, knocking over his bench and stretching his hands apart to show how the waters would open to let him through. "We will march across the empty seabed, walking back to the land where we belong."

"Sit down, Charlie," Kathleen said. "Calm yourself."

Around him, the costermongers and apprentices were staring and laughing.

"Come with me," he called to them, spreading his arms. "Come with me, my people. I will lead you back to Ireland." The gin had released a passion in him, and he shouted to be heard over the laughter and the rude shouts. "Follow me," he called to them. "Follow me back to Ireland."

Kathleen watched him sway just a little, made unsteady by the gin. He lifted his staff, and apprentices scrambled aside for fear of a clouting. Charlie strode into the

gap, his head held as proudly as a king. He lifted his staff high, and the crowd parted, leaving him a path that he accepted as his due. "Follow me," he called, his voice slurred with drink. Kathleen stood to pursue him. The poor fool would never find his way home alone. But the crowd closed in behind him, leaving her to struggle slowly toward the door.

The night air was cold and Charlie was woozy from the gin. He found himself on the street, puzzled that no one had come after him. Surely in the tavern, when they had made way before him, they had planned to follow. But when he looked back, no one was there, not even Kathleen.

He had not meant to drink so much. But the gin had touched the empty spot that had been in his gut since he left Ireland, providing him with warmth and comfort.

When the wind blew, he shivered and shuffled in the direction that he thought might lead him to his rented rooms. His head seemed to have grown largely and unwieldy: his feet seemed very far away and very slow in responding to his desires. He managed to walk just a few blocks before he sat down beneath a streetlamp for a little rest. Benumbed by gin, he fell asleep in the gutter.

On the far side of the street, a pair of whores trudged past, carefully picking their way through the garbage and filth from chamberpots. It was getting late, and law-biding citizens were at home in bed, their doors barred against cutthroats and robbers.

A dog ventured from the mouth of an alley where it had been feeding on scraps of garbage. The animal walked with a peculiar lurching gait, its right hind leg having been broken years before by the well-placed kick of a carriage horse. The bone had healed crooked, and the leg no longer touched the ground.

The dog sniffed Charlie. His suit smelled of roasting meat and gin, aromas from the Black Horse Tavern. Attracted by the man's body heat, the dog curled up by Charlie's side and went to sleep. In his sleep, Charlie moved a hand to encircle the dog.

For a time, the man and dog slept peacefully. A burning wick in the oil-filled globe that served as streetlamp cast a yellow light on Charlie's face. He smiled in his sleep.

Charlie was dreaming. In his dream, there was music: the singing of larks and the laughter of children filled the air. He was leading a triumphant procession made up of all the Irish who had left the island to seek their fortune in England. He was bringing them home, and they were all dancing after him. The girl who sold flowers was dancing with the rude lad who had called Charlie King of Fools. The girl's rags flapped around her legs and her bonnet had fallen back on her head. She and her partner were pale from lack of sun and thin from bad food, but already the sunshine was putting roses in their cheeks again. Everyone was dancing: the whore from the tavern; the old woman who sold apples; the mudlarks and the ragged Irish beggars from the streets of London.

Charlie danced at the head of the procession, laughing at the way the old

apple-seller capered. Overhead the sky was blue, and the sun was on his face. The earth was warm beneath his bare feet. He led them through the country roads to his mother's farm, past the fields filled with growing grain, out to the Giant's Boneyard, where he lay down in the fragrant grass. He belonged here, among the bones of his father. With his head pillowed on his arm, he closed his eyes. In the distance he could hear people laughing and singing.

Someone was calling to him: "Charlie. Charlie Bryne. You can't just lie there like a great lump. Rouse yourself, man. Wake up."

Charlie blinked. Kathleen was shaking him awake. "Wake up you gin soaked lump," she grumbled at him. "The cold will be the death of you if you lie here all night."

Charlie squinted up at her. "What happened?" he mumbled. "Where did all the people go?" He stared at the houses around him—tall, gray, and foreboding in the dim light.

"I've been looking for you," Kathleen was saying. "I knew you couldn't find your way alone. Now where is it you're living?"

Charlie sat up, groaning with the effort. Disturbed by the movement, the dog that lay beside him stood up, shook itself, and wagged its tail tentatively. Absent-mindedly, Charlie reached over and rubbed the animal's ears.

"I lay down to rest for a time," Charlie said. "I felt mortally tired, Kathleen."

"Mortally drunk, more like it. You put away enough gin to fell an ox."

The dog leaned against Charlie's side, a small patch of warmth in the chilly night. Charlie's hand stroked the animal idly. "They didn't follow me, Kathleen. It seemed to me they would."

Kathleen reached out and touched his shoulder. "Go back home, Charlie. If you stay here, you'll die in the gutter with a bellyful of gin."

He straightened his shoulders. "The old blood runs in my veins. I'll bring my people home." Then the edge of doubt crept into his voice for the first time. "You believe me, Kathleen. Don't you?"

"You must get on home," she said in a weary voice. "Tell me where you live and I'll walk you there."

"'Tis right by a cane shop on a narrow street where a man can scarcely see the sky," Charlie said. "Not so far from Covent Garden."

"I know the one," Kathleen said. She held her hand out to him, coaxing him as if he were a wayward child. "Come along, Charlie. I'll take you home."

"It isn't my home," Charlie said stubbornly. "'Tis a place I live, nothing more."

"True, but it's a warm place to sleep, and for tonight you'd best settle for that," she said. "Now come with me."

Leaning on his staff, Charlie staggered to his feet. The dog moved away, wagging

its tail in earnest. When Charlie stood, Kathleen's head did not reach his chest. He looked down at her and placed a hand on her shoulder, seeking the warmth of contact with another person as much as support. Charlie and Kathleen started off down the street, and the dog followed Charlie, trotting easily on all four legs.

Charlie sat in a chair by the fire. He had been on his feet all afternoon, answering questions from the gentry and showing off his size. His head ached with a blinding pain. For the past few days, the world seemed to close in around him when his head ached; his vision narrowed and blackness nibbled at the edges, like the premature coming of night. He closed his eyes for a moment.

"Hey there, lad," Vance said. Charlie heard Vance pull another chair close to the fire and sit down. "You all right?"

"I'm cold."

Charlie heard Vance poke the fire and toss some more coal on the grate. He could see the light of the fire dancing on the inside of his eyelids and feel the heat on his hands. But the warmth did not seem to penetrate the skin. The fire could warm the surface, but his bones were cold. Only the sun and earth of Ireland could warm him deep down. The sun of Ireland or a glass of British gin.

Each night, he went out to the streets to preach to the Irish. There were some who came to hear him each night, a few who believed in him. The old apple-seller called him a saint and brought her ailing granddaughter to him for healing. The little flower seller sought him out—but that may have been for practical reasons; she could count on him for a supply of fresh blossoms. The rude young men called him a conjurer, a madman, a fool. The costermongers laughed at him. He offered to show them that he could make the river waters part, but no one would follow him to the riverside. Each evening ended the same way: in the tavern, drinking gin with Kathleen.

He blinked and Vance came into focus. The little man was leaning forward in his chair, peering into Charlie's face with a considering air. "You've been drinking too much, lad. Gin will be the death of you."

"This country will be the death of me," Charlie muttered.

"Right you are, lad." Vance was not paying attention. He was counting the take. When he handed Charlie his share, he frowned a little.

"Now don't spend it all on gin," Vance said. "You'd do well to stay home tonight."

Charlie stared at Vance. He did not like the man's proprietary tone. "I will go or stay as I please," he said slowly.

Vance stopped in the act of gathering up the coins. "Well sure, Charlie, of course you will. I was just saying, as a friend, that you…"

"I go to the ginhouses to find my people," Charlie interrupted. "I find them there, drinking gin to warm their bones. They miss the soil of Ireland, though they do not know that's what it is they're missing. They feel the hollowness, just as I feel it, and

they drink gin to fill it. I go there to find them and bring them home." He stood up and glared down at Vance.

Vance studied the giant with cold, blank eyes. "Just take care not to sleep in the gutter, lad. Your cough's getting worse."

Charlie's shoulders slumped a little. His head ached and the power had gone from him. "Right you are, Joe. I'll not sleep in the gutter. I'm sorry, Joe."

Now that's enough of Charlie Bryne. Let's consider John Hunter, a man of science, as different from Charlie Bryne as a man could be. We can begin at Kathleen's stall in Covent Garden, on a chilly morning just a few weeks after she met Charlie.

The wind off the Thames blew through Kathleen's wool shawl and made her hump ache. A burly Scot dressed in a fine wool coat passed her stall and glanced into the shadows where she sat.

"You there," he said. "Have you seen the man with the dancing monkey? I'm looking for him."

"I have not seen him this morning." She studied the gentleman, wondering if she might earn a penny from him. It was bitter cold, and she had only told a single fortune that day. "I might see him later. I could give him a message."

The Scot glanced at her, his expression cautious, but strangely greedy. "I hear his monkey died," he said softly.

"I heard the same." The animal had died of a chill and the man was grief-stricken, mourning the loss of the income from the monkey's dancing.

His voice dropped a little further. "I have a need for the animal's body," he said. "I will pay handsomely. Here." He fumbled in his pocket. "A penny to tell the man that John Hunter has an offer for him." He held out the coin.

John Hunter—she knew the name. Surgeon to the King, he was. And, from the stories that she had heard, an unnaturally curious man. When the tiger died at the Royal Zoo, he had anatomized the beast and mounted the skeleton. When the Siamese twins in the Covent Garden freak show died, rumor had it that the manager had sold the body to Hunter for a tidy sum. People said he was a body-snatcher and a resurrectionist.

"And what would you do with the body?" she asked him. "You'll anatomize it, won't you?" She hadn't cared much for the monkey—a dirty, noisy animal that spent more time scratching for fleas than it did dancing. But it seemed unnatural to want to poke and pry into its innards. "Why don't you let the poor beast rest in peace?"

"Would you bury the beast so its body can rot, benefiting no one?" he asked angrily. "Why is it that people have no trouble eating the meat of a cow—but they consider it wrong to examine the dead animal too closely? Yes, I'll anatomize the beast. I'll examine the organs and see what killed it. I'll study the muscles and mount the bones so that I can study them later. And when I'm done, I'll add a few humble

observations to our knowledge of natural philosophy." His tone was bitter, and she had a feeling he was talking to himself, as much as to her. "A patient of mine—a young boy—died today of a coughing disease. When I wished to examine his lungs, to see how the disease affected them, what influence my treatment had had, his father forbade it. The ignorant fool. What I learned from his son's body might have helped me heal another child. But instead his son's body must rot in peace and children must go on dying. How can I learn to cure what ails people, if I can't observe the action of disease on a body? Would you have doctors continue in ignorance, peddling salves and tonics that work indifferently well? Little better than butchers, most of them."

Kathleen stayed in the shadows, startled by his vehemence.

He held out the penny again, his face softening as if he repented his outburst. "Come on, lass, take the penny and tell the man if you see him." He glanced at the sign that a clerk had sketched for Kathleen in exchange for his fortune: an open hand with the palm exposed, the life line marked in black ink. "I'll give you another penny to tell my fortune."

For two pennies, she left her stool and stepped from her stall. In the light of the sun, he saw her clearly for the first time. "Ah," he said. His voice was that of a man discovering an unexpected treasure. He stared at her honestly, not troubling to hide his interest. "Your back—how long has it been like that?"

"Since I was a babe." She pulled the shawl more tightly around her shoulders—distressed both by the cold and by the way he studied her. She was used to people who stared—but his interest was more intense than that of the casual passerby.

"Does it pain you?" he asked.

She nodded cautiously. "When the weather's cold, it does." She took the two coins and held his hand in hers, turning the palm up to the light so that she could study the lines. She stared for a moment, and the patterns emerged from the crisscrossing lines. "You will meet someone very important, very powerful. He has something you want very much. Some secret you are lacking." She frowned at the lines. "You want something and you get it, but when you do, it will not be what you want." She shook her head, staring at the lines. "There is something that you do not understand, something important."

He laughed abruptly at this last. "That is not the future. That is now. There are many things I do not understand."

She shook her head and released his hand. "That is all I can tell you now." She started to turn away, but he called her back.

"Wait," he said urgently. "I have a salve that might help your aches." He wet his lips and his expression was that of a greedy child. "If you come to my examination room, I will give you some. My house is on Jermyn Street. Anyone nearby can tell you the way there."

Kathleen studied his face. He did, in his own peculiar way, wish to give her relief

from the pain. But he also had an unhealthy desire to know the twists of her bones. She did not trust him.

"I would like to examine you," he said. "Perhaps I can help."

"I'll give some thought to it," she said, and turned away from the eagerness in his eyes. She had lived in London long enough to be wary.

John Hunter was, without a doubt, a curious man. He started out as a curious boy, naturally enough.

When John was just eight, he found a burrow in the winter-blasted kitchen garden of his parents' Scottish farm. Curious about the animal inside, he dug beneath the frost into the cold soil, where he found a toad lying in a tunnel of its own making. The animal was cold and motionless—by all appearances, stone dead. But when he held it tightly, he thought he felt a stirring inside the cold body—the beating of its tiny heart. He slipped the animal into the pocket of his britches and smuggled it past his mother into the house.

He set the stiff creature just behind the coal scuttle, where it would be warmed by the heat of the fire, and left it there during supper. When he checked on it just before bed, the creature had stirred to reluctant life. It blinked at him lazily and then slowly hopped across the hearth rug.

His mother caught him. "What have you there, Johnnie? Lord save me—where did you get that beast?"

Despite his protests, she cast the toad back into the garden. In the morning, he found the chilly corpse huddled beneath a clump of straw. He warmed it in his hands, but it did not move. He snuck it into the house and warmed it by the fire, but the beast did not return to life. He puzzled over it: why had the beast perished when it was returned to the cold?

In the back of the chicken run, where his mother wouldn't catch him, John anatomized the body with his pocket knife, delving into its innards to see if he could learn why the beast had died.

John Hunter grew up. As a boy of twelve, he loitered with his cousin by the churchyard. His parents were inside, christening his youngest sister. Bored with the proceedings and ignored by the adults, the boys had slipped from the church.

Late afternoon clouds hung low in the sky, as gray as the tombstones in the churchyard. John and his cousin leaned on the stone wall, idly chatting.

"The churchyard's haunted," John's cousin said. "At night, the ghost of old man MacDonald wanders among the graves, looking for children who are out too late." MacDonald, an old man who had died a month before, had had a reputation for disliking small boys.

John looked doubtful.

"You don't believe in ghosts?" His cousin's tone was challenging.

John considered the question carefully. He was a methodical boy. "I've never seen one. Have you?"

His cousin hesitated, and then decided to stick to the truth. "No, but I've heard about them." He wet his lips, studying John's face. "If you don't believe in ghosts, then I dare you to run around the old man's grave. Three times. Counterclockwise."

John thought about it. "If I run 'round it counterclockwise, that'll bring bad luck," he said. "I believe in bad luck."

"Then just go out and touch the grave and come back. I dare you."

John stared out into the graveyard. It seemed darker now—the low hanging clouds stole the light from the day. The old man's grave was a long way off. He was afraid—but he was also curious, and the second emotion was the more powerful of the two. What would a ghost look like?

"Or else you have to say that you believe in ghosts," his cousin went on.

In the end, it was John's own curiosity, not his cousin's taunting, that drove him on. John climbed the churchyard wall, scuffing the knee of his best pants against the damp stone. With a nonchalance he did not feel, he strolled toward the grave. The graveyard was very quiet. In the hush, he listened to the tiny skittering sounds of birds in the trees, the whisper of his pantlegs brushing against the wet grass. Suddenly brave, he reached out and touched the wing of a stone angel. Cool stone, nothing more. The air smelled of dampness and fresh-turned soil, only that. He slowed his footsteps, waiting for something to happen in the stillness. He glanced back at his cousin and was startled by how far he had come: his cousin's face was a spot of white against the darkness of the church-wall.

When he reached the old man's grave, he laid his hand on the stone and waited. Nothing happened. He stood still, almost disappointed. He had, up to that moment, been willing to believe in the ghost, if the ghost had chosen to present himself. John lingered for a moment, studying the new stone marker, chose a single flower from the bouquet beside the grave, and then walked back.

From a distance, he could see his cousin's face, his wide eyes. John handed his cousin the flower from the old man's grave. "I guess I don't believe in ghosts," he said, and realized it was true.

Years later, John climbed another graveyard wall—this one in London. The stones were slippery beneath his hands. It was a moonless night in early winter. John Hunter and a fellow student, bent on acquiring essential supplies for their anatomy classes, wore workmen's clothing that was stained with clay from past excursions.

John ghosted along the paths of the deserted graveyard, sniffing the air for the scent of freshly dug earth. At the far corner of the yard, he found what he was looking for: the new grave of a young woman, dead of childbirth just one day past.

Thomas, his colleague, lifted the flowers that decorated the grave aside, setting

them on a nearby grave. Working quickly, John started digging, using a wooden shovel to avoid the tell-tale rattle of metal on stones. Thomas spread a canvas sheet over the grass, and John heaped the loose soil on top of the cloth. The exertion of digging warmed him pleasantly. When he tired of digging, Thomas took over, digging silently while John kept watch.

"Is that a sound?" Thomas whispered, looking up from the grave and cocking his head in the direction of the church.

"Just the wind," John muttered. "Nothing more."

Thomas shivered, looking over his shoulder. "A nasty business, this," he murmured. "I don't like it."

John glanced at his friend and shook his head. "Hush," he said. "Too much talk." John took another turn in the grave, digging quickly down to the coffin lid. He neatly slipped the broad iron hooks under the edges of the lid, up near the head of the coffin. He climbed from the grave and then he and Thomas hauled up on the rope. The lid cracked with a dull splintering sound, and John lowered himself onto the grave to lift the broken wood out.

After that, it was easy enough to slide a rope around the shoulders of the corpse and pull her through the opening. They stripped the body—stealing clothing carried a greater penalty than stealing a body alone—and slipped the naked cadaver into a canvas sack. They refilled the grave, leaving no evidence that they had passed that way.

John arranged the flowers tenderly on the grave, then slung the sack over his shoulder. The two men left the graveyard as silently as they had come.

After delivering their burden to their surgical school, they stopped in the tavern. John was cheerful, but he noticed that Thomas seemed morose. "What is it, Thomas, my lad? We did a fine job—the body's in the school, ready for tomorrow's lesson, and there's no harm done."

Thomas shook his head. "Doesn't it bother you?" he asked softly.

John looked up from his beer. "What should be bothering me?"

"Creeping about in the churchyard at night," Thomas murmured.

John took another swallow of beer. He did not understand Thomas' need to chatter on about the matter. John was not fond of the late-night escapades, but he accepted them as necessary to his training as a surgeon and took them as a matter of course. He could not learn about human anatomy without dissecting cadavers.

"If we do not get the bodies, we cannot learn anatomy," John said. "And if we do not learn anatomy, then how can we be surgeons?" It seemed obvious enough.

Thomas shrugged, staring into his beer. "It doesn't sit right," he said. "That's all."

John studied his friend's face, frowning. "What is it that bothers you, Thomas? The woman is dead and gone. We cannot hurt her by taking her body."

Thomas was watching him with a peculiar expression. John shook his head,

bewildered by his friend's mood. It seemed to him sometimes that understanding human anatomy was simple compared to understanding the peculiarities of the human heart.

There was, perhaps, a bit of something missing in John Hunter, some bit of human sympathy, some bit of wonder, some bit of fear of the unknown. You might say he was a brave man, but it was not truly bravery, because he saw no reason to be afraid. You might say he was a devil, completely lacking in common human compassion, but you would be wrong there as well. He had compassion of a sort—he dearly desired to help those who were ailing and in pain. But he lacked a sympathy with those who would leave the dead untouched. When life had fled, a body—be it mother or wife or beloved child—was dead meat. He did not understand those who saw it differently.

And so John Hunter became a surgeon. But he did not limit his investigations to the human body. He was a man of boundless curiosity, eager to investigate everything that nature had to offer. He concerned himself with the habits of hedgehogs, the animal heat of growing vegetables, the behavior of cuckoo birds, and the natural history of the viviparous lizard. He collected information like a jackdaw gathering shiny bits of metal. He discovered, by experiment, that the heart of a frog continued beating hours after the animal's spinal cord had been severed. He learned that eels could survive near-freezing temperatures. He developed a method for artificially stimulating the production of pearls by river mussels. In all his studies, he found human curiosities most interesting. By examining anomalies, he felt he could gain an understanding of the normal way of things.

Now of course Charlie Bryne and John Hunter must come together—you know that as well as I do. And so it was that on a sunny day, John Hunter went down to Covent Garden. He had stopped at the freak show to see if the showman had obtained any specimens for him. Every now and again, the man picked up something that John found of interest: the tattooed forearm of a South Sea Islander, for example, preserved in brine by a seaman with a liking for oddities; or the skull of a pig that was born with a single eye.

That afternoon, the showman had nothing to offer, and John strolled through the market. As he walked past an aisle of vegetable stalls, he heard the sweet song of a greenfinch, sounding over the calls of the melon seller. He followed the birdsong to the end of the aisle. There a man stood beside a cage filled with songbirds that chirped and fluttered their wings against the rough wooden slats. In his hand, the birdseller held a smaller cage, in which a gaudily colored bird sat on a perch.

"It's God's truth," the bird seller was saying to a young woman. "I bought this bird from a sailor who had just come from the West Indies. A bird like this—why it can be taught to talk just as clear as a person. Two shillings is an uncommonly low price for such a bird."

John stepped closer, peering at the bird. Without a doubt, the bird was a greenfinch; the gaudy colors were painted on.

"That's too dear for me," the young woman said, stepping back from the cage. "Though I'm sure it's a wonderful bird."

The birdseller cast John a glance and decided he was the more likely prospect. "You look like a discerning gentleman, sir, one who would appreciate a rare bird. Very rare, indeed."

John snorted. "You're a fool, man, or you take me for one. The bird is a greenfinch that you've painted up like a Drury Lane tart." John pursed his lips and whistled a credible imitation of the greenfinch's song. The bird in the cage stirred in response, then returned the song, staring about as if searching for its rival.

"What a pretty song," the birdseller exclaimed. "I've never heard a greenfinch sing like that in all my days."

"Then you've never heard a greenfinch sing," John said abruptly. The attempt at deception, however clumsy, annoyed him. "A greenfinch is worth three pence, but with a little paint, you've more than tripled the price. I've half a mind to…"

The birdseller's eyes widened as he looked past John. "You there," he cried. John looked around in time to see finches and sparrows explode through an opening in their cage and make for the open sky. Beside the cage stood an enormous man. In one hand he held the slat that he had ripped from the cage; in the other, a wooden staff decorated with hawthorn blossoms.

"God save us!" shouted the birdseller, running to the broken cage. The last of the sparrows flicked its tail and took flight, leaving the cage empty save for loose feathers and bird droppings. The birdseller began to shriek. "You blasted noddy-headed fool!" He turned on the big man, raising his hand as if to strike.

The man straightened to his full height and glared down at the bird-seller. "They wanted to go free," the big man said.

John stared at the giant, amazed at his dimensions. He had, on occasion, visited freak shows that advertised tall men or giants, but this man topped them all.

The birdseller lowered his hand, his fury tempered by a fearful respect. But he continued shouting. "Who's going to pay for my birds? They were my livelihood, and now they've flown. I'll call the constable on you, you great lout."

"Here, man," John said hastily. "I'm sure that the constable would be interested in this foreign bird that you painted at home."

The birdseller glanced uneasily at his one remaining bird. "Now, sir, there's no need of that. This quarrel is none of yours."

John reached into his purse. "Stop your shouting," he said, handing the man a few coins. "Take this for your trouble, and leave well enough alone."

"Hours of collecting for nothing." The birdseller continued complaining bitterly as he pocketed the coins.

"What about that one?" the giant asked, waving a hand at the caged bird.

John dug two shillings from his pocket and took the cage. Then he glanced again

at the giant and suggested, with a jerk of his head, that they leave the place before the grumbling birdseller changed his mind. The giant led the way down to the River Thames. At the river steps, he sat down and held out a hand for the cage. Heedless of the mud and fascinated by the big man, John sat on the stone beside him.

"Poor bird," the giant muttered, looking at the greenfinch.

"The color will wash off," John said. "I'm sure the birdseller used the cheapest paint he could find."

The giant opened the cage door and the bird hopped out onto the man's finger. He splashed the bird with river water. The runoff was scarlet, and the tail feathers lost a touch of color.

John marveled at the bird's passivity—no doubt it was stunned by the heat of the day. But more than that, he marveled at the giant. A magnificent specimen, John thought. He wondered, gazing at the man's oversized hand, what the bones looked like underneath. Ah, what he would give for a skeleton like this man's in his collection.

The man's face was broad and young-looking. His blue eyes were a little wild—a hint of lunacy there.

"Why did you pay for the birds I let go?" the giant asked John.

"I wanted to make your acquaintance," John answered honestly. "I've never seen a man as big as you before." He was watching the giant closely. "Do your hands pain you? I noticed the knuckles seemed reddened."

"They ache, right enough."

"I thought so. Your knees and hips—they give you pain, too?"

"My knees, and hips, and feet, and hands. They all ache, God save me. They have since I came to London."

John nodded thoughtfully. "I have a salve that might help a bit with that," he said slowly. "Worth a try. If you'd like to come to my office, I could give you some."

The giant looked down at John. He seemed to be grateful for the man's attention. "Perhaps I will."

Just a few days later, in the dissecting room of his Jermyn Street house, John Hunter instructed a group of would-be surgeons in human anatomy. The corpse of an old man lay face down on the dissecting table. Over the course of his instruction, Hunter had neatly laid back the layers of skin and fibrous tissue covering the muscles of the lower leg, lecturing his students on the treatment of injuries to the Achilles tendon. He stressed, as always, the need to experiment and observe.

Only after dissecting the leg to the hip did he complete his lecture and dismiss the students. He watched them go, wondering if any of the lot would ever amount to much. Or would they become like their learned teachers at St. George's, relying on historical hearsay, failing to test and experiment and observe?

Hunter removed his bloodstained smock and washed his hands in a basin of clear water. He was climbing the stairs that connected his basement dissecting room with the rest of the house, when Mrs. Shields, the housekeeper, appeared in the doorway.

"A tall man named Charlie Bryne is here to see you," she said, looking a little flustered. "A very tall man."

"Very good, Mrs. Shields," John exclaimed. "Very good indeed. Send him right in."

The giant stood uneasily by the fire, in the small room that served as John Hunter's examination room. He was out of his element, John thought. By the river, he had seemed confident, powerful. In this confined space, he lacked that expansive vitality. His shoulders were hunched, as if the ceiling were pressing too close. His face was pale. His hands were clasped behind his back, like a schoolboy who had been told not to touch anything. John studied him, estimating how large a display case he would need for the skeleton.

"I've come for that salve you told me about," Charlie said. "I thought it might help warm me."

"I'm so glad you could come," John exclaimed. "Sit down. Mrs. Shields will bring us some tea—or perhaps a glass of sherry. That would help warm you."

"I've never had sherry," Charlie said.

"Then you must try it now," John said. "Please sit down." He gestured to a chair. "How's the greenfinch? Did its feathers come clean?"

Charlie nodded. "It flew off. Back to the country."

Mrs. Shields brought the sherry, pouring the glasses and setting the tray down on the table by the fire. John lifted his glass and smiled at Charlie. "Here's to the birds. I'm glad they didn't die uselessly in the smokes of London."

"Aye," Charlie said, and sipped his sherry.

John hesitated for a moment, considering his words, then spoke quickly, eager not to miss the opportunity. "Would you mind if I took a few measurements while you're here? Your body temperature, your heart rate—a few simple things, really."

Charlie frowned. "Why do you want all that?"

John chose his words carefully. "I study people like you," he said.

Charlie shook his head. "I do not think there are any other people like me."

John waved a hand to dismiss the objection. "Not precisely like you," he said. "Not giants. But people who are smaller than most, or bigger, or somehow different. The differences are where Nature's secrets lie. I have dedicated myself to the study of amazing things. By studying these things, I learn about the world. If I knew why some lambs grew two heads, I'd know why most grow only one."

Charlie finished his glass of sherry and John poured him another. "Why do you want to know that?"

John set his glass of sherry on the table and leaned forward. "Your body is a remarkable machine, Charlie. When you will it, your fingers move, your eyes blink, you stand, you sit." He reached out and tapped lightly on Charlie's chest. "Your heart beats in your chest, steady as a clock. Why?" John sat back. "You grow and keep on growing, so much larger than other men. Why?"

"Because the old blood runs in my veins," Charlie said, but John ignored the interruption.

"The answer's in there," John said. "In your body. Ticking like a clock."

Charlie glanced uneasily at his own chest.

"I want to understand these things," John murmured.

"Perhaps you cannot understand," Charlie said. He drained his second glass of sherry and held out his glass so that John could fill it again.

"I just don't know enough," John said. "Nature is keeping her secrets, but I will outsmart her." He sipped his own sherry. "If you will do me the great favor of letting me take a few measurements…"

Charlie shrugged. "As you like," he said.

John counted Charlie's pulse, took his temperature, measured his height, his girth, the length of his hands, his feet, the reach of his outstretched hands, and the circumference of his head. As he worked, noting each measurement in the pages of a little book, John made conversation. "I have the bones of a great whale, strung together just as they were when the animal lived. Fascinating creature."

"I have never seen a whale," Charlie said. "Biggest fish there is, they say."

"I've never encountered a live one, but a student of mine supplied me with the pickled carcasses of two smallish specimens. They're less like a fish, from the build of their skeleton, and more like a cow."

"A cow that spends all its life at sea?" Charlie commented. "Not bloody likely."

John shrugged. "They lack the gills of a fish, but have lungs of a sort: Most peculiar. I've preserved their skeletons in my museum. The skeleton betrays much about the working of the body." He settled back into his chair, done with measurements for just then. "We share an interest in natural history," John said. "Perhaps you would like to come to my country house sometime. See my gardens, my menagerie. A pleasant break from the streets of London." He watched Charlie's face for a sign of fear. Ah, the man was an innocent; he smiled at John.

"I'd like that," Charlie murmured. "That I would."

They became friends, of a sort. On many a fine afternoon, John went to meet Charlie at his rooms. Sometimes, he brought the giant a bottle of sherry and they sat by the fire and talked. John brought a salve that seemed to ease the pain in Charlie's hands, though he still complained of aching knees and hips. He seemed to feel most comfortable by the fire.

In his own way, John genuinely liked the giant. The man fascinated him. John had decided quite early in their acquaintance that Charlie was quite mad. He had a peculiar turn of mind—he told John quite seriously about the most amazing things: haunted meadows and ghostly kings and magic swords. John could tell, from Charlie's wild tale of his own conception, that the man was of illegitimate birth. Charlie told John about his quest—he had to bring the Irish back to Ireland—and John nodded politely, accepting this as just one more indication of the giant's madness.

John was struck by the giant's remarkable staff and its seemingly permanent crown of flowers, though he gave no credence to the miracles Charlie claimed it had performed. He examined it closely, verifying that the blossoms sprouted directly from the wood. He had heard that the branches of certain trees in the West Indies continued to bear leaves even after they had been cut from the parent tree, and he speculated that the staff might be of a similar plant, one that only resembled the common hawthorn. He wanted to cut the staff in half to see if the wood were green inside, but Charlie would not allow it, would not even allow the staff out of his sight.

As the weeks passed, it became obvious that London did not agree with Charlie. Clearly, the man was dying. His hands trembled as he raised a glass of sherry to his lips; he could never get warm. He developed a cough that shook his frame like an oak tree in a gale. His skin grew pale and broken blood vessels in his nose and cheeks betrayed his affection for gin. He took to wearing shoes, trying desperately to keep his feet warm. John noted Charlie's decline with a mixture of regret and anticipation. He would miss the opportunity to study the living giant, of course, but he was eager to examine the body and bones.

He worried, sometimes, about Charlie's drinking habits. If the giant died in the gutter, who could know where his body might end up. Body snatchers abounded, and John feared that some other surgeon might obtain the body.

It was during this time, on a fine sunny afternoon, that John took Charlie to his country house at Earl's Court. They rode in John's coach, though the giant had to hunch his shoulders and bow his head to fit in the seat. The lethargy that had grown habitual seemed to drop away from the giant as soon as they left London. Charlie stared out the window, grinning at the trees and meadows.

"It's wonderful," he said. "Just wonderful to see green fields again."

At Earl's Court, John took Charlie around the grounds, showing him the exotic beasts and fowl. Charlie gaped at the zebra and smooth-skinned Asian water buffalo that shared a paddock, shook his head in amazement at the two young leopards and the African lion. In the conservatory, he marveled at John's beehive, a box that had been built of plate glass. Beneath the glass, the worker bees hurried through the complex combs, going about their business. Through the glass and from the surrounding fields came the faint sound of buzzing.

"It reminds me of home," Charlie said, his voice a soft rumble. "I used to sleep in my mother's fields, listening to the sound of the bees in the clover. A beautiful sound."

"I've studied the pitch of their humming and compared it to the pianoforte," John said. "It's treble A above middle C."

Charlie did not seem to be listening. He was leaning close to the glass, watching the workers making their way through the combs. "So many of them, so busy."

"An average of approximately 3,400 to a hive, by my count. And there's always a queen bee, you know. In every hive I've checked."

Charlie held out his hand, and a bee that was returning from the fields landed on a finger.

"Careful there," John said. "They've a nasty, irritable temper. I was stung four times last week."

"They'll not sting me," Charlie said. The insect crawled over the massive hand, its wings buzzing, but it never stung.

"Come," said John. "There's more to see."

John led the way to the fishpond, where he bred carp, tench, leeches, and eels for experiments. On the way, he noticed that larks, finches, and other small birds seemed to be particularly abundant in the fields that day—the grass was alive with them. They fluttered up from the grass before them, circling the giant's head before flying away. Once, to John's amazement, a lark landed on Charlie's shoulder, tipped back its head to release a torrent of song, then flew away. John was wondering at what had brought the birds to this place when Charlie fell behind. John looked back to see the man unfastening his shoes. One large foot was already bare.

"Feels good underfoot," Charlie said. "Warm. Not like the streets of London." He took off his other shoe and set the pair beside a fencepost. Straightening up, he lifted his arms over his head in a prodigious stretch. He looked healthier than he had for weeks.

"The sunshine agrees with you," John commented. He considered the giant for a moment. "You could stay here for a time, if you like." That would solve so many problems—Charlie might live longer, but John would no longer have to worry about losing the body. The situation would be under his control.

Charlie's face brightened momentarily, but then he frowned and shook his head. "I cannot do that."

"I could take you into London, now and again," John persisted. "But you could stay here the rest of the time. The city air's unhealthy. It does you no good."

Charlie shook his head stubbornly. "Until I can return to Ireland, I must stay in London. That is where the Irish are and that is where I must stay."

"As you will," John said. He considered, as he walked, whether the right time had come to ask the giant about his bones. He tried to introduce the notion of scientific investigation gently. "You must see my other animals." He led the way back to the paddocks surrounding the house. He stopped by the pig pen and leaned on the fence. "I've found pigs to be the best for experimentation. They are easily managed

and breed well in captivity." The old sow had pushed close to the fence and was staring up at Charlie. The tall man leaned over to scratch the top of her head, and she sighed in contentment.

"What has happened to her piglets?" Charlie asked. All three of the young animals bore scars on their right hind leg and limped a little.

"They are part of an experiment," John explained. "I am investigating the way bones grow. The French botanist Henri Duhmamel du Monceau claims that they increase by accretion throughout their length. I maintain that they grow from the extremities." He explained his experimental procedure to Charlie. He had operated on all the piglets. On each one, he had laid bare the bone of the right rear leg, drilled two holes precisely two inches apart, inserted lead shot in the holes, and then stitched up the incision again. Following the operation, John was butchering the piglets one by one at weekly intervals and checking the bone. Though the leg bone had lengthened overall, the distance between the deposits of lead was the same as it had been on the day that he inserted it. This supported his hypothesis that bones grew through accretion at the ends, not in mid-span.

Charlie stared at the piglets in the pen. "Why is it you want to know how bones grow?" he asked at last. "Isn't it enough that they do? By God's grace, they grow quite well."

"Can't always trust in God's grace," John said briskly.

"What else is there?"

"'Knowledge," John said. "Sometimes, they do not grow, or they grow improperly. I want to know why." He gazed at the piglets. "There is so much to know," he murmured. "Do you know, Charlie, if I could look at your bones, I might be able to tell why they pain you so. It would not help you, but it might help someone else whose bones ache."

"My bones?" Charlie stared at him, his eyes suddenly wide. "You want to see my bones?"

"When you die, Charlie, as we all must do," John said gently. "If I could take your body…"

Charlie was backing away from him, his expression shocked. "My bones, John? What would you do with my bones?"

"Examine them, Charlie." John spread his hand, the gesture of a reasonable man making a reasonable proposal. "You'll have no more use for them, once you're dead."

Charlie was shaking his head. His big hands formed fists at his sides. "My bones must return to Ireland," he said. "That's where they belong. I promised my father…"

"Superstition, Charlie," John said gently. "You must not take it so seriously."

Charlie turned and fled. Startled by Charlie's reaction, John called after him, but the giant did not look back. John ran after him, but did not have a chance of

overtaking him. Finally, he let the man go, knowing that he would eventually return to his rooms in London.

John was sorry that Charlie had reacted so precipitously. He reviewed the conversation in his mind, wondering how he might have made his suggestion more delicately. In the end, he decided that nothing he could have said would have overcome the giant's superstition, so John made peace with himself. He spent that night at Earl's Court, dissecting a series of worker bees, an exacting task that soothed his nerves.

The next day, on his morning stroll, John noticed a new variety of flower growing in the meadow. The plants grew low to the ground and bore tiny golden blossoms. They grew only in discrete patches. John realized, on close examination, that the flowers had sprouted in the giant's footprints. He attributed this curious effect to the compression of the soil beneath Charlie's feet and drew up plans for a series of experiments to test the sprouting of seeds under pressure.

Charlie heard John's voice calling him back, but he did not stop. In his haste, he dropped his shoes and left them behind, escaping John Hunter's voice.

It was a cold afternoon, and the walk back to London was a long one. A farmer gave him a ride for a few miles in an ox-drawn cart filled with straw, but he walked the rest. His legs ached by the time he reached the outskirts of the city proper. He let his head hang, unwilling to look up and see the smoky sky overhead. The road was cold and hard beneath his bare feet.

When rain began to fall, he made no effort to take shelter. The cold drops soaked his coat, plastered his hair to his head, ran down his cheeks like dirty tears, leaving tracks of soot behind.

Back at the rooms, he fell ill and lay on the straw ticking mattress that served as his bed, unable and unwilling to move. "It's the gin," Vance said. "I told you it'd be the death of you." Charlie did not reply. He lay on the pallet of blankets that served as his bed, staring into the flames of the fire.

A few days later, Kathleen found him there. When he did not come to visit her stall in Covent Garden, she came looking for him. On the door beside the caneshop, a notice said: "No show today. Come back tomorrow." By the look of it, the notice was several days old. When Kathleen banged on the door, Mary, the landlady, answered and regarded her with a sour look.

"I have come to see Charlie," Kathleen said. "I'm a friend."

"Visit him quick," Mary said in a scornful tone. "He may not have much time left." She let Kathleen in and the hunchback found her way through dimly lit, stale-smelling rooms to Charlie's bedside.

He lay on a straw ticking mattress by a fire that burned low. Light from the glowing coals gave his face a ruddy color that did not match his feverish eyes and mournful expression. He was shivering despite the blankets that covered him. "Ah, Kathleen," he murmured. "Sit with me for a time. I am lonely now, very lonely."

Sometimes, he shivered and huddled closer to the fire; sometimes, he threw off all his blankets, suddenly drenched in sweat. He complained that his head ached constantly.

He was sick and delirious for three days, and she stayed with him, bringing him bread and cheese to eat, tucking the blankets close around his shoulders, holding his hand so that he would know he was not alone. On the seventh day, he came to himself again. Kathleen had fallen asleep on the floor beside his mattress, and she woke to see him watching her.

"Kathleen," he said. His eyes were sad, but the fever had left them. "What are you doing here?"

"Taking care of you, Charlie my lad."

"There's not much use to that now," he muttered. He shook his head weakly. "I've been foolish. I thought that the magic would be strong enough. But that's dead and gone. The world is changing."

"Don't say that, Charlie." Now that he was finally giving up his mad notions, it pained her to see it.

"I'll die here in London."

"No, Charlie," she said, "you'll get better soon." He just shook his head, recognizing the lie.

"Have you seen Joe Vance?" he asked.

Kathleen went out looking for Vance. After the darkened room, the courtyard seemed brilliantly lit. She found Vance lounging in the gray light that passed for sunshine in London, practicing a game involving three shells and a pea. When she told him that Charlie wanted to see him, he reluctantly followed her into the room.

"You're looking bad," Vance said. "That doctor—John Hunter—came to see you again. Says he might be able to give you something for that fever, if he could see you. A swell gentleman, by the look of him."

Charlie shook his head. "I told you I will not see him."

"Been a week since any money came in," Vance said slowly. "And Mary will be looking for her rent, come Monday."

Charlie said nothing. He was watching the flames, ignoring Vance's words. When Vance stood up, as if preparing to go, he roused himself. "You got to help me, Joe," he said. "Can you tell me where I'd find an honest undertaker?"

Mr. Fields, undertaker and friend of Joe Vance, studied Charlie with an expert eye and decided that he wouldn't last long. His face was pale and wet with sweat; his eyes were bloodshot.

"You're interested in a coffin?" said Fields. "I'll have to build it special. That'll be extra."

"You must make arrangements for me," Charlie muttered weakly. He reached out and grasped Fields' hand. "Take my body back to Ireland. To my mother's farm. You must see to it. I'll pay."

"I've heard of Chinamen sending their bones home," the undertaker said, "but never an Irishman."

"Please," Charlie said hoarsely, squeezing the man's hand. "You must see to it." He fumbled in his bedclothes and pulled out a small pouch that clinked in his hand. Fields eyed it, assessing its contents. "You must take me home safe."

"For a price, anything can be arranged," Fields said heartily. "You can rest easy, Mr. Bryne."

Kathleen nursed Charlie as best she could. But when her money ran out, she had to return to her stall in the afternoons and evenings to earn money she needed to bring him food. She brought him bread and cheese and mutton stew, though he did not eat half of what she brought.

It rained that week, a dark sooty rain that turned the streets to mud. The costermongers went out late and came in early, with little profit to show for their efforts. The mud clung to the wheels of coaches and to the horses' hooves, and the hackney drivers cursed the weather. The men who carried sedan chairs got chilblains.

Early in the morning on the seventh day of rain, all the dogs of St. Giles Rookery congregated at the door to the canemaker's shop. The canemaker tried to drive them away with kicks and curses, but as often as he scattered them, they returned. He gave up at last and tried to ignore them, glancing out only occasionally to see the filthy mongrels sitting beneath his sign. Surprisingly, the dogs did not fight.

The cats came later, slinking over the rooftops. Despite the rain, they crouched above the canemaker's shop, glowering at the people in the street below. Strangely, the dogs did not bark at the cats and the cats did not yowl at the dogs. They waited quietly.

Early in the afternoon, a sparrow came to perch on the wooden sign that marked the canemaker's shop. For a time, it sat alone in the rain, its feathers fluffed against the cold. Then it was joined by another sparrow and a pair of finches. A little later, four mourning doves came to perch on the sign, not far from the cats. But the cats made no move to stalk them.

The canemaker looked up when a sound that was at once familiar and strange penetrated his consciousness, making its way past the rattle of coach wheels and the cursing of drivers. He paused, brush in hand. Still holding the cane that he had been varnishing, he went to the doorway, following the sound that called up memories of his boyhood in the country. Sitting on his sign, above the filthy street, a meadowlark was singing its heart out.

From the eaves, the mourning doves watched him with their bright black eyes. From the gutter, the dogs regarded him sadly. The canemaker looked up at the small,

gold-flecked bird, then retreated into his shop.

Twilight settled over London. The light had a peculiarly gray tone, as if the city had sucked all color and life from the air. The proprietor of a pie shop was lighting an oil lamp to hang in the door of his establishment. Here and there, the yellow glow of burning lamps marked the shops and taverns that remained open.

Joe Vance emerged from the hallway beside the canemaker's shop, kicked his way through the crowd of waiting dogs, and made his way to the nearest tavern. Just inside the door he surveyed the smoky interior, then made his way to the corner table, where the undertaker waited with John Hunter.

"How fares the patient?" the undertaker asked jovially. He had been drinking gin, by the smell of it, and he was smiling, an expression that sat uncomfortably on his long face.

"Won't be long now," Vance said. "I took him a bottle of gin to ease the pain."

"And hurry him along," said Fields, chuckling. He grinned at John Hunter, but John glared back, not sharing the joke.

"I'd help him if I could," John muttered defensively.

"Certainly you would, Dr. Hunter," Vance said expansively. "We all would. Why, I care about the lad as if he were my own son. Isn't that so, Fields?"

John scowled and shook his head, believing none of it. "Let's get on to business," he said.

The undertaker nodded and spoke softly. "Now, we were discussing the price. Dr. Hunter had offered twenty pounds for the body."

"Twenty pounds?" Vance scowled, forgetting his love for the giant at the mention of money. "Out of the question."

"It does seem inadequate for the unusual merchandise we have to offer," the undertaker murmured. "It seems to me that ten times that amount would be fair."

John Hunter looked up from his beer. "You'll find few takers for such merchandise."

"Ah, you would be surprised," said the undertaker. "My conversations with the head surgeon at St. George's Hospital suggest that there may be a number of takers."

"Thirty pounds," John said.

The bargaining was protracted. Vance spoke of his great affection for the giant so eloquently that his eyes became moist with tears. He was the giant's friend—perhaps his only friend—and he would never consider the doctor's offer were it not for his own need for capital. Persuaded by his own eloquence, he felt a brief pang of regret, but dismissed it as John raised the price.

Fields stressed the rarity of the commodity they offered. "Unique on the face of

the earth," he said. "An opportunity like this comes along once in a lifetime—if you're lucky."

John was the least garrulous of the lot, protesting that the two of them had unrealistic notions of their merchandise's value. But clearly Vance and Fields had the advantage. Finally after much gin and talk, John settled at one hundred pounds and would not budge. They drank to seal the bargain.

The clock was striking eleven when Vance went to check on the giant. The street seemed unnaturally quiet. In the dim light of the tavern's lantern, Vance could see that the dogs were still waiting. He heard a rustle of feathers above his head. Suddenly, the lark sang, a sweet burst of glory, like a sudden ray of sunshine in a dark place. The largest of the mongrels tilted back his head and began to howl, and the rest joined in, wailing like banshees.

A man in a nightshirt flung open the window above Vance's head and shouted at the dogs, but the howling continued. The shouting was followed by a pail of water and then the contents of a chamberpot. Vance quickly ducked for the protection of the tavern doorway. Retreating inside, he said to Fields and John Hunter, "I suppose he's dead."

In the dark of night, with the help of Vance and Fields, John Hunter stripped the corpse of the dead giant, slipped a sack over the body, and loaded the sack into his coach. In his haste to be off, he overlooked the giant's staff, which was propped in the corner by the fire.

The pack of mongrels that hung about the door followed the coach for half a mile or so, but he lost them after that. At Earl's Court, the coachman, who had grown used to nocturnal errands, helped him load the body into a barrow and transport it to the basement workshop.

Alone with the cadaver, John hesitated. "So Charlie," he muttered, "You came to me after all, whether you would or not. I feel half sorry for you, but I suppose you died happy enough." He shook his head, thinking of the giant's superstition and ignorance. Then he wielded his sharp knife and prepared Charlie's bones for the boiling pot.

It was nearly dawn when he became aware that the caged lark in the next room was singing its heart out. He cocked his head to listen, wondering what had prompted the bird to sing. In the months that he had kept it in confinement beneath the earth, the lark had never to his knowledge sung a note.

Putting the last bone in the pot, John went to investigate, but the bird fell silent at his approach and never sang again.

Charlie was gone when Kathleen returned from Covent Garden that night. His room was dark and the fire had burned out. His clothing was scattered about the straw ticking mattress, and she guessed at what had happened.

When she found his staff by the fireside, its blossoms wilted and dry, she knew

he was dead. He never would have left without it. She took the staff with her when she left. It had a nice feel in her hand and it reminded her of Charlie.

It was strange, but her hump never ached when she held the staff in her hand. Free of the pain, she drank less gin. After a time, it seemed to her that her hump was beginning to shrink. And then she was sure of it: the twist in her back grew straighter every day.

Her livelihood shrank with her hump—no one would pay for a fortune from a straight-backed Irishwoman. She lost business to the fortune teller on the other side of the garden, a darkskinned man who wore multi-colored scarves and stared into a crystal to see the future. Finally, with the last of her earnings, Kathleen returned to Ireland. There was no reason to stay in London, and the staff in her hand gave her the urge to wander. She went to Ireland and wandered the winding roads, telling stories in return for a bit of food and a place to sleep. Sometimes, she told stories of London. Sometimes, she talked about a giant named Charlie, and in her tales he grew to nearly the size of Bran the Blessed. It was not a bad life.

A month of wandering and she found herself in County Derry. Enquiring here and there, she found her way to the wild pastureland known as the Giant's Boneyard. There she leaned the staff against the largest boulder and stood for a time, looking out over the valley and thinking of Charlie. At last, she decided to walk back to the village and look for a friendly home where she might sleep—but when she went to pick up the staff she found that it had taken root. White blossoms sprouted from the dry wood, and new green shoots reached for the gray sky. She left it there, where it belonged. She had had it long enough.

Eventually, Kathleen married a farmer. As a farmer's wife, she took care of the land. It was a hard life, but one for which she was well-suited, with her strong back and willing ways.

* * *

John Hunter examined Charlie Bryne's skeleton carefully, but the doctor died without learning why Charlie grew so large. More than one hundred years after John's death, a surgeon named Harvey Williams Cushing examined Charlie's skull and noticed a deformity in the bone that had covered the pituitary gland. This observation ultimately led to Cushing's discovery that the pituitary plays a role in controlling human growth, one more small piece in the great puzzle that John Hunter was trying to solve.

Cushing did not explain why birds often congregated at the window of the room in which the giant's bones hung. The sill was thick with their droppings. Sometimes, they would rattle on the glass with their beaks and flap their wings impatiently, as if demanding to be let in.

Perhaps Cushing did not notice them. Like Hunter, he was preoccupied with understanding what made the human body tick. He had no time. for the foolishness of birds, the poetry of cloud formations, the illegible scrawls left by snails crawling across the slate paving stones in the garden.

That's the truth, as near as I can tell it. Oh, historians may quibble with some events I have described. I can find no historical documentation detailing the flowers that grew on Charlie's staff or mentioning the staff at all, for that matter. And perhaps the birds did not really gather at the window to pay court to Charlie's bones. I can find no records that say they did—but then, I can find no denial of it either. Surely these are minor points. At its heart, the tale is true.

Charlie Bryne is dead and gone and his bones still hang in London's Royal College of Surgeons. In the Giant's Boneyard, songbirds nest in the hawthorn thicket that has grown up near the boulder that old people call the Giant's Skull. In this lonely spot, there lingers a sense of sadness and loss. Sometimes, a foolish traveler, heading home late at night, will feel a sudden chill as he passes the field. When the chill touches him, he'll clutch his coat around him, glance back over his shoulder like a man pursued by ghosts, and hurry home to the safety of electric lighting, content to live in a world where ghosts do not walk and bones rest easy.