

Is This All There Is?

Jonathan is lonely. He's tried to get used to his new home in this remote Cornish farmhouse, but it's such a change. His last home was a comfortable house with electricity, indoor toilets and a bath. But bombs were falling all around the area; at night, guns were firing at the aircraft overhead. Air-raid sirens were wailing at all hours; there were shelters dug in back gardens. Perhaps that's why his mother brought him here, far from the anguish of the War, to this place where there is no indoor toilet, no electricity or gas.

He is sitting on the end of his bed staring out of the window at the fields sloping steeply upward to a distant hedgerow. That's as far as he can ever see. He's discovered that behind the hedgerow is a tiny lane running between steep banks where the vegetation grows at a tropical pace. There are snakes in those banks, adders that bite; a small child could die from the venom.

Today it's raining in grey clouds that are sweeping over the already sodden fields. This rain can find its way through anything. Even the granite walls of the farmhouse can't stop it; every room smells of damp. Down in the farmyard, ankle deep in mud and manure, the farm dogs are cringing into any doorway they can find. Above the hedgerow, the sky is a deeper grey than the rain. He asks himself, 'Is this all there is?'

Jonathan has already devoured his weekly paper, 'The Rover'. All he has to read are some Beano and Dandy Annuals and his mother's books in a bookcase holding a Children's Encyclopaedia, ten volumes of knowledge that he digs into when he gets bored with the Idylls of the King or Grimm's Fairy Tales. He's tried to read some of his mother's books but they're a mystery to him. What was that one called? 'The Harvester', that was it, a dark and sentimental tale set in the woods somewhere in America. He sighs, wishing his friends lived closer. Even if he had any dry clothes in his wardrobe, venturing outside would mean he'd have to put on wellington boots and that rubbery old raincoat.

A voice from behind him growls, "I'm your friend, aren't I?"

Jonathan smiles; it's Desperate Dan with his huge blue chin, always triumphing by using his superhuman strength. How many adventures had they been through together? Dozens, Jonathan thought, always farfetched yet predictable. Dan's heroics never involved romance or girls, which suited Jonathan very well. And Dan ate cow pie, with the horns showing through the pastry, so Jonathan liked him just for that.

"Yes, Dan," said Jonathan, "You're my friend, what would I do without you?"

Another voice came, "And what about me?"

It's Pansy Potter, the strongman's daughter, a strange rhyme that always makes Jonathan smile.

A bad joke is better than none, he thinks.

"I like you too," he says, although why a girl has to be so strong is beyond him.

The girls in the village school are stupid; they can only talk about dolls and dresses. He only sees them in the playground when the classes are over, and then he'll be wrestling with Tony. All the boys wrestle; it's a Cornish tradition. All over this isolated county there are championship events which draw good sized crowds, like competition ploughing and the Silver Bands.

The village school is a mile and a half from the farmhouse and has only two rooms, one for boys, one for girls. The boys' teacher is a large woman; he has no idea how old she is. Yesterday, she'd entered the room in full sail, like a Spanish galleon approaching Plymouth, where Sir Francis Drake is playing bowls. She settled the room down and called him forward.

"Jonathan, this is your writing test from last week. You have gained top marks, well done."

He recalls the other boys staring at him; so that would be one more mark against him. He's always top of the class, these village boys can hardly write, let alone spell. What do they care, there's no future for them, they'll just become farm labourers like their fathers, probably on the same farm that their family has worked as far back as records are kept.

What Jonathan doesn't know is that his essay on 'Our Village' contains words that have raised his teacher's eyebrows. This boy will go far, she thinks, he should be entered for that up-country scholarship. Such an achievement would look good for the school; and for her, of course.

Another voice is claiming his attention; dragging him back into the dreariness of his room. This time it's in a language that he wouldn't understand unless he'd read those stories about King Arthur.

"Ho, boy! Why such a sorry face?" It's Sir Gareth, his favourite Knight.

Jonathan loves the story of Sir Gareth and Lady Lynnette. He could almost recite it, he thinks, if anyone was interested. It'd be a disaster to do it in front of the village boys; he was already their target for speaking like a 'furriner', like someone from the other side of the River Tamar.

Sir Gareth breaks through his reverie again.

"Gird up thy loins, boy, the weather will change of a certainty and find thee languishing in thy chamber."

Jonathan knows this to be true, the weather changes every five or six hours, but the thought of those long grey hours ahead is too depressing. He shrugs.

"Come, boy, there are ventures ahead, valiant deeds to be done, the King to be served."

Jonathan hears an echo of the newspaper headlines, all those heroes serving their King and Country. He recalls a pilot who lost both leg and returned to flying, a real hero to a young boy. But what did Sir Gareth mean? What ventures?

"Where is thy steed, boy?"

What is he talking about? I don't have a steed, well, only Dobbin. And even Dobbin wouldn't call himself a steed. He spends all his time wandering around the lower field. He does come when I call, though.

"Look out thy window, boy!"

This time Sir Gareth's voice is different, it's a Knight's voice, permitting no argument.

Jonathan does as he is told, and there, standing directly in his view is a white horse, with black harness, tossing its head and stamping its feet with impatience. Jonathan can hardly believe his eyes. And now the sun is shining, bringing a silvery sheen to the horse's coat.

Sir Gareth is hoisting Jonathan into the saddle.

"Sit thee straight, my lad," he says.

Jonathan has never sat in a saddle before; whenever he rides Dobbin it's bareback, holding on to the mane. He used to worry that the horse felt him tugging, but Dobbin never seemed to mind.

Behind him, Jonathan hears another horse and the sound of Sir Gareth mounting. He dare not look back; if he turned, he'd fall off.

But then Sir Gareth says, "March afor!" and the white horse moves obediently into its stride. It's all Jonathan can do to get into the rhythm, for his horse has more energy than Dobbin could ever muster.

To his amazement, they take the tiny abandoned path up the hill, long deemed impassable by the farmhands, more of a stream bed than a useable lane. Today it ought to be running in water, but it isn't. The horses take their time going up to the old gate covered in lichen and weeds. Jonathan once ventured up the rugged passage, only to discover that the gate had been swallowed into the hedgerow.

But today the gate is open and they clatter across the lane; there is no hedgerow on the other side of the lane, just a huge expanse of sky. They walk forward onto a green sward of turf.

Sir Gareth's voice comes like a gust of wind, "Behold, the sea!"

And there stretching away to the limit of Jonathan's vision is the ocean, glinting from a thousand points of light where the sun is bouncing off the waves. The sea is looming towards them, wave after relentless wave. Further out there are white sails speckling the green and blue.

Jonathan is in awe, wondering how the sea has come so far inland from where the Camel River meets the Atlantic, ten miles away.

Sir Gareth says, "Look, boy, look at that white-sailed craft headed towards us. It has come far, from Phoenicia, my boy, all that way for lead and for tin."

Jonathan has heard the tales about those sailors, swarthy men with olive skin. He's heard the older boys whispering about how the sailors had been weeks on the voyage and what they wanted when they came into port

Apparently it was the Cornish girls.

Jonathan used to think it was just another myth, but he could hardly ignore the evidence; there were Cornish boys and girls with olive skin and black hair. Some of them had streaks of Celtic red in their hair.

Jonathan spots a smudge of smoke some way off shore. Beneath it is a huge hull with three massive funnels. It is forging westward through the waves, further away with every second. It can only be the Queen Mary, there is a picture of it in the Encyclopaedia, it holds a record for the Atlantic crossing, what is it called? Blue Riband, that's it!

It will be going to America, a land of his dreams, his imagination fired by those Saturday morning films about cowboys and Indians and cops and robbers. He recalls those war-time American soldiers handing out boxes of boiled sweets; they called them candies. In England sweets are still rationed and the sight of a whole box was something out of a fairy tale. The soldiers also handed out tins of something called 'Spam', which was a rare treat for Britons on their wartime meat ration.

So, Jonathan thinks, across that vast Atlantic Ocean lies America.

But it might as well be on the Moon.

"Look yonder to thy right hand, young one," says Sir Gareth.

Jonathan does as he is told.

"Canst see that island, there in the mist?"

Jonathan nods.

"There lies Camelot, my boy, and there I belong."

There is something new in the Knight's voice, sadness and longing.

Jonathan has an idea.

“Is that where the Lady Lynette is?”

There is a long silence.

“How knowest thou of her?”

Sir Gareth’s voice is harsh.

“Didn’t you escort her to her home, sir?” asks Jonathan, worried that he has said something wrong.

“Thou hast knowledge improperly gained, boy!”

“But sir, I know the story.”

“Tell me what thou knowest.”

So Jonathan, sitting on the white horse with the black harness, recites Tennyson’s story of how King Arthur assigned Sir Gareth to help the Lady Lynette rescue her sister, Lyonesse. Sir Gareth escorts the Lady through all sorts of dangers and battles with evil Knights until at last they arrive at the Castle Perilous and set Lyonesse free.

Occasionally, Jonathan hears a grunt or a groan from behind him, but Sir Gareth doesn’t interrupt.

When Jonathan comes to the end of the story, there is a long silence.

“Go to, boy! Thou spinnest a fancy tale. And, pray, which of the maidens doth Sir Gareth take to wife?”

Now Jonathan is stumped, for the Tennyson version ends in a mystery. How does it go?

‘Some say that Sir Gareth married Lyonesse, but others say he married Lynette.’

Jonathan shrugs.

“I don’t know, sir.”

He thinks for a while and says, “Surely you know, sir?”

Sir Gareth laughs, “And as surely that would spoil thy tale!”

In a more serious voice he says, “Some things must remain a mystery, boy, other things will be made clear to thee in time. Thou, my boy, will discover what the future holds for thee; this only can I tell thee, it will take thee far from here, along such paths as dreams are made of.”

A familiar voice comes from afar.

“Jonathan, come and get your lunch, the soup is getting cold.”

It’s his mother down in the kitchen, struggling to make something out of the meagre rations.

He looks around at his room. Where is the white horse with the black harness? Where is Sir Gareth? And where is that shining sea, stretching away to the far horizon, hinting at an even farther shore where magic reigns?

He gets up and goes downstairs.

He doesn’t hear the voices in his room.

“What sort of friend is he?” says Desperate Dan, “going off and leaving us here”

“Not even a wave goodbye,” sniffs Pansy Potter.

Then a voice says forcefully, “Mind thy tongues, this boy will go far and will forget about thee. But me, he will always remember me.”

It’s raining again.

When Jonathan looks out of his window, he doesn’t see the sodden fields and dripping hedgerows; what he sees is the limitless sea, the ships sailing into and out of port and the distant shore where magic reigns.