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Written by Karen Maitland

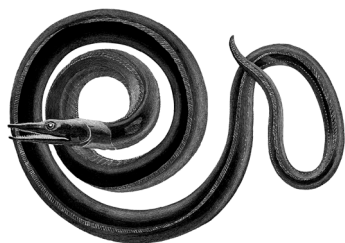
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THE PLAGUE CHARMER

KAREN MAITLAND



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REVIEW

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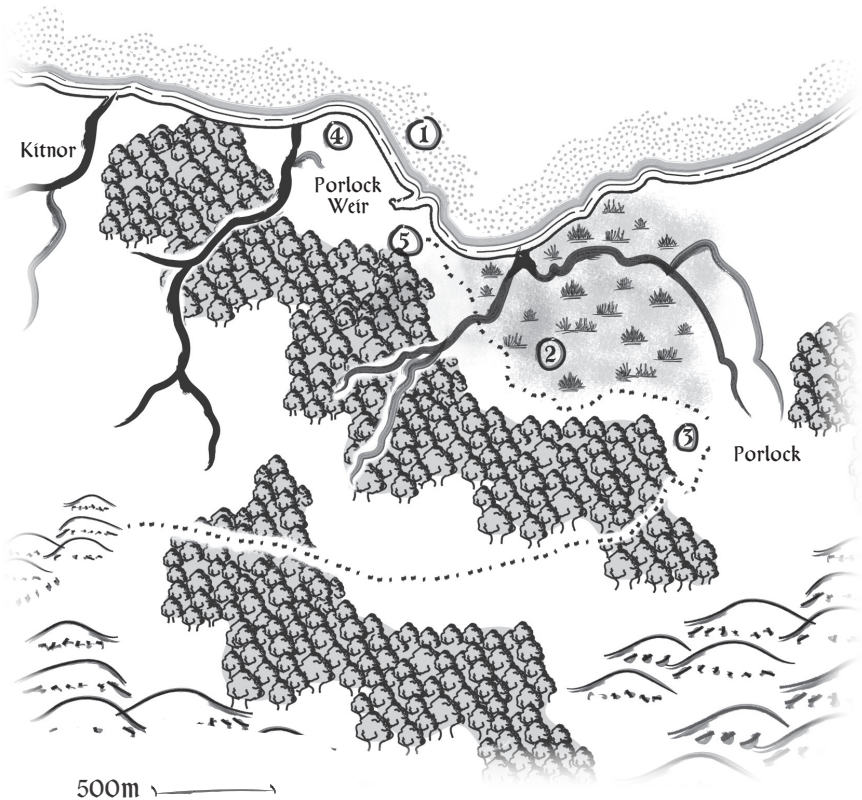
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KEY PLACES

1. Will's cave
2. Marshes
3. Porlock Manor
4. Clifftop cairn
5. Road to Porlock Weir



The cruellest month in all the year
is the month of Janiveer.

Weather lore saying

Are those her ribs through which the Sun
Did peer, as through a grate?
And is that Woman all her crew?
Is that a DEATH? and are there two?
Is DEATH that Woman's mate? . . .
The naked hulk alongside came,
And the twain were casting dice;
"The game is done! I've won! I've won!"
Quoth she, and whistles thrice.

*From The Rime of the Ancient Mariner written 1797–8 by
Samuel Taylor Coleridge. In 1797, the poet lived for a time on
a farm near Porlock, Somerset, where this novel is set.*

Cast of Characters

Porlock Weir

Will – dwarf, former court jester to Sir Nigel Loring

Janiveer – the woman from the sea

Sara – wife of **Elis**, a packhorse man, mother to sons

Hob and **Luke**

Aldith – sister-in-law to Sara, wife of **Daveth**, a fisherman,
mother to **Col**, **Ibb** and **Kitto**

Goda – Aldith's sister and seaman **Jory's** lover

Matilda – devout woman, wife of **George**, a ship's
carpenter, and owner of **Gatty**, the cat

Sybil – owner of the village bake-house and brew-house

Cador – village bailiff, husband to **Isobel**

Katharine – married to the drunkard, **Skiener**

Father Cuthbert – parish priest of Porlock and Porlock Weir

Harold – youth in Minor Orders, acolyte to Father Cuthbert

Bald John – blacksmith and husband to **Cecily**

Abel – elderly fisherman

Meryn – man with a withered leg

Crabfish – lad regarded as simple

Porlock Manor

Sir Nigel Loring – absentee lord of the manor

Christina – niece of Sir Nigel, daughter of **Lady Aliena**,
and new bride of **Sir Randel**

Baby Oswin – Christina's secret son
Lady Pavia – cousin to Sir Nigel and Christina's mother
and widow of **Hubert**
Sir Harry Gilmore – guest at Porlock Manor
Helen, Mary and Anne – three young wards of Sir Nigel,
chaperoned by **Lady Margery**
Master Wallace – steward of Porlock Manor
Eda – elderly tiring maid to Christina's mother, now
Christina's maid
Rosa – stillroom maid

In the Burial Cave

Brother Praeco – Prophet and leader of the Chosen Ones
Uriel – spiteful first wife of the Prophet
Phanuel – timid second wife of the Prophet
Raguel – third and youngest wife of the Prophet
Friar Tom – an elderly member of the Chosen Ones
David and Noll – henchmen and trusted disciples of Brother
Praeco
Alfred – an apostate who left the Chosen Ones

*Note: Exmoor ponies were known locally as **horsebeasts** or **widgebeasts**. The word 'pony' was not used on the moor until the 1700s.*

Prologue

The storytellers say that . . .

Once, long ago, in the land of the Celts, a boy was born who was possessed of great power and strength. From a small child, Cadeyrn could transform himself into a bear and in that form he would pass through the Gate of Mist to journey into the realms of darkness and light. The druids recognised special gifts in the boy and were determined that he should become one of them, perhaps even the greatest among them. But Cadeyrn was also skilled with the axe and the sword, and others foretold he would become a mighty warrior and leader.

Cadeyrn grew in stature and his skills grew with him, but even when he had become a man, the two paths lay stretched out before him and none in his tribe could tell which he would follow.

Then one day when he was out hunting, he saw a youth set his dogs upon a she-bear that was protecting her cubs. Filled with rage, Cadeyrn pursued her attacker into a grove of oak trees. Mistletoe grew upon the branches and the law decreed that, even in the midst of battle, upon seeing the sacred herb a man must lay down his weapon and depart in peace, without shedding blood. But Cadeyrn's wrath was so great that he did not notice the mistletoe. He raised his axe and chopped off the youth's head with a single blow.

Blood spurted from the severed neck, splashing the branches of the tree beneath which the youth had taken refuge. Only when Cadeyrn saw the drops of scarlet staining the white berries did he realise he had strayed into a sacred grove. When the druids saw that blood had been shed in that holy place, they cursed him.

That night when Cadeyrn tried to pass through the Gate of Mist, it closed against him and he could no longer enter the other realms. He knew then that his destiny had been sealed: he would become a warrior. And when Cadeyrn went into battle, his path to glory seemed assured, for he slaughtered dozens with his axe and his enemies fled in terror before him. But just as victory seemed within his grasp, the druid priests appeared. At once, the battle turned against Cadeyrn and, with his men, he was forced to flee for his life across the sea to England. There he fought again and this time he conquered the people of those lands, vanquished their leader and was proclaimed king.

Now, the people who lived in those parts were Christians and they were afraid that this bloody warrior would slaughter them and sack their church, so they drew lots and sent to him a young boy, who offered himself as sacrifice. He said he would willingly die any death Cadeyrn chose for him, however agonising and terrible, if only the king would spare the people and their church. Cadeyrn was so moved by his courage that he asked the boy the name of the god he worshipped and vowed that he, too, would pray to this god, as well as to the gods of his own ancestors. Cadeyrn swore a solemn oath that anyone who called upon the name of Christ would be granted the king's protection, and he would defend them even to his own death.

But though he had spared the daughter of the Christian

ruler he had vanquished and had treated her with honour, she and her maids were filled with hatred against Cadeyrn and sought vengeance. She collected the poison of the viper and the venom of the toad and coated the holy chalice in the church with them, knowing that when the king came to Mass he would be offered the cup first.

As Cadeyrn raised the chalice to his lips, a raven flew down and dashed it from his hand. The wine spilled in a pool across the floor of the church and the raven dipped its beak in it to drink. The bird had taken only a sip before it dropped dead. When the king saw how the raven had saved him, he took up the carcass with his right hand, intending to give the bird an honoured burial, but as he touched it, the bird revived and flew up on to the roof of the church.

At that, the Christian princess and her maids became even more vengeful. They plotted with Cadeyrn's enemies, revealing to them the means by which they could invade his lands while he was absent. They attacked without warning, burning his villages and carrying off his women and his cattle.

When Cadeyrn returned and discovered what his enemies had done, he marched on their stronghold that very night and camped before their gates ready to give battle at dawn. But the princess had hidden her maids among the servants who travelled with the warriors and she had given instructions that they should add dwale to the food they prepared for the king.

The herb made the king drowsy, and when dawn came, he could not fully rouse himself. He fought with the heart of a bear, but the dwale had fuddled his senses and made him clumsy. He was overpowered and taken prisoner.

Cadeyrn begged to be allowed to die in combat, but his enemies tied him to a tree in the middle of the forest. They chopped off the hand with which he'd given battle. But instead of blood, a stream of pure water flowed from the wound and became a mighty river. In fear, they shot him with arrows, but still he lived, and finally they cut off his head.

His enemies left his corpse for the ravens to peck and the beasts in the forest to devour, but the ravens covered his severed head with their wings and beasts guarded his body. That night, the priest of the church saw a wondrous sight. A great bear came out of the forest bearing the body of the king and laid the corpse gently on a stone slab on the hillside. All that night, a golden light hung over the place where Cadeyrn's body lay, vanishing only when that greater light, the sun itself, rose.

The body of Cadeyrn was buried under a great cairn of earth and stones at the place where the bear had laid him, with much gold and many precious objects. But Cadeyrn's hand and head were borne away by the Christian priests as holy relics.

And they say that each evening at sunset a raven brings a stone to add to the cairn that stands over the resting place of the warrior king, and when that mound is high enough to reach the sky, Cadeyrn will awaken and ride once more to battle.

Chapter 1

Will

Riddle me this: How many calves' tails would it take to reach from the earth to the sky?

She appears without warning, standing in the mouth of the cave staring in at me. Tattered skirts and long strands of hair flap wildly in the sea wind, like the feathers of the dead gull washed up on the shore. Her face is in darkness. Her eyes glitter like a wild beast's in the firelight. She stands there so long, so silently, that I think she may be the ghost of a drowned soul come to drag me down into the green waves below. I am not afraid. I would almost go willingly with her now. Almost, but not quite.

She crouches and from the depths of her cloak she pulls out a bundle, which she lays reverently on the rocky floor in front of my fire, an offering, as if I am a pagan god or Christian saint.

'You will look after him? Keep him safe from them?'

The bundle stirs. A tiny fist clenches the air. The thing gives a faint mewling sound, like a cat demanding to be let in. I shuffle closer. The baby is naked, wrapped only in a goatskin. But not a cured skin: the inside is black with dried blood as if it has only just been ripped from the carcass, or

perhaps it is stained with the woman's birth blood. The infant looks to have been no longer in the world than the goat has been out of it.

'Is the child sick?' I ask her.

'No . . . but he will be. They'll make him sick . . . dead, like the others. I heard the owl. Owls know when death is coming.' Her fingers pluck repeatedly at the rags of her skirt. She is crazed, poor creature, and little wonder.

'Take it away. How do you expect me to care for it? What am I to feed it – mackerel?' I drag myself backwards, deeper into the cave, making it plain I want nothing to do with the infant. 'Even a grown man could freeze to death at night in this place – that's if the sea doesn't drown him first.'

'But you'll protect my baby. Creatures like you can keep us from evil spirits and make the sick well. I know it. I heard the stories. You're a—' She breaks off, as if even the name for *creatures* like me can conjure a power she dare not summon.

She's wrong, though. A fraud is what I am, an imposter. They expect miracles of me, but they might as well stick bluebells up their arses and dance naked on the seashore for all the good it will do them. I am fool's gold, though even now I do not admit it aloud.

The owls knew it was coming. The villagers knew it was coming. Even *I* knew it was coming. It was only a matter of time. But, you see, that's exactly why it caught us unawares. It crept up on us and pulled our breeches down, cackling with laughter. Time is the trickiest of all tricksters, and I should know. I was a jester by profession, but I never had the skills of Mistress Time. She can stretch herself into a

shadow that reaches so far you think it'll never come to an end or she can shrink to the shortest of mouse-tails.

You ask any man under sentence of execution, and I've seen a good many of those. I've mocked and pranced in front of them as they were hauled to the gallows. My lords and ladies have to be entertained while they wait for the main spectacle. Heaven forbid that time should drag for them. But for those piteous felons, desperately praying for more time, she races away from them. Yet the moment they fall to pleading for the pain and agony to be quickly over, Mistress Time wantonly slows to the pace of a hobbled horse. That is her way, the naughty harlot, to do exactly the opposite of whatever a man begs her to do.

The rumours of what was coming were brought by pack-horse over the high moors, and ships that carried word to shore. It could not be ignored, should not have been ignored, but it was, even by me. Maybe we thought that there in that isolated village, with the steep hills protecting our backs and the raging sea as our ramparts in front, we were safe in an impregnable fortress. But when time lays siege to a castle, there is no fortress that she cannot take in the end.

I, above all, should have known the games Mistress Time plays. I was her creation or, rather, the creation of my master, who was in her pay. My master was proud of his handiwork, of me. You see, I am a *nain*, a dwarf. But I am not a *natural* dwarf, though you'd never guess to look at me. As my master constantly reminded me all the days I was growing up, or in my case not growing *up*, I am a sculpture, a carving, a work of art that took years of patient craftsmanship to perfect.

Not that I could ever disclose that to a living soul. My

old master was paid a handsome purse for the purchase of a genuine dwarf, for they are valuable creatures. But it would've been my miserable carcass upon which my new lord would have vented his fury if he'd ever discovered he'd been cheated. You see, *real* dwarfs, natural-born dwarfs, are bringers of good luck. They protect the household from all kinds of evil and misfortune, like the relic of a saint or an amulet, only we dwarfs have more uses than simply to hang around on a wall. We can protect you from any sickness and cure any ailment. Just rub us on the affected part, like bear grease on to a bald pate, and see the miracle we can perform . . . which *they* can perform, but not me. I am a fake. I am the alchemist's stone, which is nothing but a polished pebble, the finger of the holy saint, which is merely a dried chicken bone.

I watched my master create other dwarfs as he had made me and he was right: it requires rare talent and much time to create us little people. But I'll tell you the secret, give it to you for nothing. Now that is a bargain you can't refuse.

First you take a lusty infant – they must be strong to survive the moulding – and fit it with an iron frame over its baby head and face. One of the iron bars with hooks on either end goes in that little toothless mouth to stretch the lips into a permanent wide grin. Dwarfs are supposed to look cheerful, and it spares us the effort of having to fix our mouths into a grin in company. It wouldn't do for that smile to slip, now, would it?

The other iron bars of the bridle flatten the baby's button nose and squeeze its skull so that the forehead bulges with wisdom and intelligence. Next you must rub the infant spine daily with the fat of tiny creatures – shrews or dormice, bats

or moles are thought to be most efficacious. Finally you strap the infant in its iron bridle into a snug, stout box, open at the front, of course, for you don't want to suffocate your little homunculus – think of all that wasted time and money. Suckle it daily on the juices of dwarf elder, knotgrass and daisies mixed with milk from a dwarf goat. As the baby grows in its box, it will be compressed and deformed, squished and squashed ever tighter till it emerges from its mould, formed like a gingerbread manikin into the squat little dwarf that lords and ladies so desire.

My master was a kindly man, as he always reminded us whenever he beat us. It wrought his heart to hear the infants cry out with pain from the cramp and sores, and being so tender-hearted he could never bring himself to break their limbs to hasten the process, or dislocate their joints to make them bendy as acrobats. Dwarfs could be fashioned in a fraction of the time by such methods, he told me, though he never thought the results looked truly authentic. As a craftsman, he prided himself on the slow, careful moulding of the tender clay.

And when I was ready, fully baked so to speak, he sold me for a heavy purse to a sycophant who bought me as a gift for Sir Nigel Loring, the powerful envoy and confidant of Edward, the Black Prince, the hero of the battles of Crécy and Poitiers. As I was to discover, my new lord owned several manors, including Porlock, not that he ever spent much time at any of them, but my service for him proved to be the beginning of the journey, which, years later, was to end with me freezing my cods off in a damp sea cave only a few miles from that same manor at Porlock. As I say, Mistress Time plays some merry tricks.

I had been trained by my old master to be a jester – that

is the job of the dwarf, to tumble and conjure, mock and mimic at feasts and festivals. But we do much more than that. We are also dispensers of punning wit that our lords fancy are words of profound truth, for we're children with the faces of old men and *out of the mouths of babes and sucklings*, as the priests say.

Actually, I never minded that part so much. Those were the times I could make fools of the longshanks. All I had to do was turn a somersault, put on a droll face and declaim utter gibberish. The more nonsensical the words, the more attention they gave them.

'I am the son of water, but when water touches me I die. Pray who am I, my lord?'

'Let me think . . . I know this . . . Ice! The son of water is ice.' Sir Nigel beams at the company triumphantly. His sycophantic guests applaud their host's cleverness.

'Aah, but the sun is a golden egg that none may eat, my lord. Beware the day water touches that sun for all will die.' Now they nod as sagely as if I had just revealed a prophecy from St John himself.

You see, give them an easy one to make them think they're clever, then you can babble complete drivel and get tossed a coin for it, because they would never admit before all the company that they cannot fathom the wisdom of a fool.

So innocently wise and so utterly truthful do the longshanks believe dwarfs to be that the fate of thrones and whole kingdoms is entrusted to the little people. Dwarfs are sent as gifts into the courts of rivals to act as spies. They're entrusted to carry the secret documents of kings and traitors alike. They stand in plain view while their masters and attendants are searched, for who remembers to search

the grinning child-fool? Dwarfs are sent out alone on battle-grounds, carrying the white flag with its offer of parley. They are trusted to approach even by the most wary, though we might wear the assassin's knife: none can believe we could reach up to strike the victim's heart.

But I never reached the battlefield, which would have granted me at least a little honour and glory. No, I was used as a bed-warmer to heat the feather mattress of Sir Nigel and Lady Margaret before they retired, so that they should not endure the shock of slipping naked between cold sheets. In winter, I was also foot-warmer to Lady Margaret's mother when she was being carried in a litter between two horses. I crouched beneath the old woman's skirts – her own lapdog, intended for the purpose, would not stop bounding from side to side across her lap, barking at every hound that was running alongside the riders.

When the old woman wanted to relieve herself on the journey, she'd rest her pisspot on my back. It was, as she said, a convenient height. But the indignity of that was nothing. After all, a jester loses his dignity so many times a day, he wouldn't recognise it if he fell over it. No, the task I really hated was kiss-bearer.

It was the fashion then that when a woman wished to flirt with a man who was not her husband, she would seize a dwarf and smother him with wet kisses, then bid him deliver them to the object of her affections. The dwarf was supposed to climb upon the man's knee and bestow on him the kisses he had received. Worse still, if the man was of a mind to return her advances, the longshanks would kiss the dwarf as many times as he desired to kiss the maiden or married woman and send the little person back to deliver them. As you can imagine, this mummery could continue

for hours until the dwarf was as wet as if he'd been slobbered over by a pack of hounds.

That was not the worst of it. Sometimes this flirtation by proxy – or should I call it *dwoxy*? – went well beyond mere kissing. Every disgusting touch, each illicit fondling by both parties had to be endured by the dwarf, then re-enacted by him on the lover for whom it was intended. Inevitably the most enthusiastic players of this game were men and matrons of advancing years and foul breath. They trusted dwarfs, you see, for we always carried the truth. Poor fools, they never suspected that I was not a real dwarf. If one man in particular had known, he would never have entrusted me with the kiss that would shatter both my life and hers. It was a curse, not a kiss, I carried.

I turn around and the woman is gone, vanished as if a wave has licked her up out of the cave's mouth and the sea has swallowed her. But the baby still lies where she left him, mewling resentfully and staring up at the roof of the cave where firelight and shadows dance out a thousand stories. I waddle over and scoop him up. I should toss him into the sea. It would be kinder. A few moments and it would be over. No pain, no fear, no agonising death that lasts too long and yet is far, far too short.

Instead, I find myself tearing my only spare shirt into strips to make swaddling bands. If you don't bind those pliable limbs straight, the infant will grow bandy, not as bandy as me, of course, but if this baby must grow, let it be into a man, not a manikin. That much at least even a fake dwarf can manage.

I carry him to the cave entrance and stare out into the darkness. The waves foam white, rearing up and crashing

down on to the pebble beach as if they mean to smash every stone to sand. Clouds race across the moon, like herds of animals fleeing some nameless predator. There is a storm coming, a storm greater even than the last one that brought so much destruction. I do not need the owls or even the gulls to tell me that. A storm was how it all began; maybe another will finish it. Finish it for us all.