



# *The Gamekeeper*

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Religious

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## The Game Keeper

His fingers were cold. Down to the bone even, but still he worked them to finish tying the wire netting together closing the hole through which several birds had already escaped. He worked mostly by touch. It was dark, the sun long ago having disappeared below the horizon, and still there remained a few days more before the winter would finally mark the death of the old year.

He had tried to hold his torch under his arm but the fading, dying batteries had thrown only a weak yellow glow that looked as though it should belong in the window of some cosy warm cottage, though here it gave no warmth and not even enough light to be useful.

The gamekeeper put down the torch and with his eyes closed felt the ridge and shape of the wire which he twisted together with grim determination. A sharp point pricked his middle finger and the cold intensified the pain to a short burst of agony. He pressed his chilly fingers together waiting for the pain to dwindle.

A gentle breeze penetrated the dense, dark conifers that grew on the top of the hill and covered the pens containing the protected birds. Grouse and Pheasants for the shooting pleasure of the city folk.

The old man, his face etched with deep cheek lines that fell either side of his mouth reached up to curl his jacket closed at the neck where it had fallen open. The breeze was finding its way beneath his clothes. A chill on his chest he knew would have him in bed for a week, and that would be time he could ill afford.

He blew on his fingers to draw some feeling back to their tips and with cold determination to finish the job, he plaited and knotted the strong wire as best he could.

He was cold. His feet were numbing, and his toes rubbed together painfully with each little effort. He tried not

to move them at all and imagined that later, in front of the warm wood stove he would gently remove his heavy boots and dampened socks, and simply hold his toes, embraced in his fire warmed hands, one after the other as he sat one leg crossed over the other's knee.

Such a reward would justify the cold he now felt. Such a faith in the warmth of his stove was reassuring to the old man, and he set his mind to finishing his task all the sooner.

His chest hurt a little. No doubt, he thought, I have caught a chill already. He pulled his flat cap closer to his head trying to close all openings to the waiflike ghostly fingers on the breeze that seemed to pull at his clothes to loosen them.

As he twisted and sewed the wire, his mind began to wonder at all the years he had been working as a gamekeeper. All his life near as can be said. He was old now. His knees hurt terribly when he knelt to attend the wire. Seventy-seven summers had come and gone whilst his heart held him to the earth. He remembered the sun, the green of the trees, the laughter, the fun, the love he had had, and he smiled. Seventy-seven springs and seventy-seven autumns. Each season a parade of colour and change. His niece had once asked him when she was a child of about ten or eleven; "Uncle, which is your favourite season of them all?"

He had smiled at her beautiful young face. "Can't you guess?" he had replied.

His niece thought for a while before saying with some confidence, "summer!" Then a cloud of doubt had crossed her face an instant later and quickly she added, "no wait, winter? Spring? Autumn?"

Her uncle chuckled. He loved her very much and treasured the attention that she gave him when she spoke to him, so much so that he would never answer her questions directly just so that she would have to ask another. She waited patiently.

"My favourite season" began her uncle with an air of mystery, "is always the one that is coming next."

His niece seemed pleased with that answer, and she ran off to play with the other children in the village. The gamekeeper had watched her go wearing a broad smile. He knew that this was as close as he would ever get to happiness, and he thought of that terrible night when he had lost both his own wife and their unborn child. A cold and lonely night such as this one. And now he could not see his niece without thinking of what might have been. His own brother's delirious joy and rapture of his family was to the gamekeeper a cursed happiness.

This winter would mark his seventy-seventh when the spring would break again and the days would be longer. The thought of sun made him smile inwardly. He loved the ancient dark of long nights, of the power of the

solstice and the redness of the holly berries in the dead of the world, but as he had said to his niece, after a while, he always looked for the change to come.

And yet, for many long years no thing of any importance had actually changed. One spring had blossomed to summer, summer had bloomed to autumn, and autumn had fallen to winter again. But it was ever the same. And these last years he had been feeling tired. He must do something he had said to himself.

“Yes” he said out loud, though softly to no-one in particular. “When the sun returns I shall travel a little I think.”

“And where will you go?” asked a soft, concerned voice from the darkness of the trees.

The old man looked sharply towards the dense blackness below the fir branches, but saw nothing.

He fumbled his torch on, but the feeble light barely lit up the wire netting in front of him.

“Who said that?” the old man enquired, careful to keep his voice from sounding afraid though in truth he was a little. He had passed his entire life in the countryside and had learned as many of its strange ways as he thought possible. Though he further knew that there were some secrets that the trees and the birds and the flowers still kept.

For a moment there was no answer. Only a silence as still as the grave. The breeze had stopped and no longer chilled the old gamekeeper. There was no noise at all. No owl hooted, no branch cracked, no tree whispered a rustle of needles.

And then, feeling a little braver at the thought that he had imagined the words, he said in vague defiance; “I will go where I please.”

“Oh” replied the same soft voice. “You will go at your pleasure?”

Now the old man knew he had heard aright the voice from the woods. There was no mistake.

“Show yourself!” he said to the darkness sounding more brave than he actually felt.

“As you please” the voice said.

A small light appeared a little way off, no more than a dozen paces. It flickered and danced a little but stayed

where it was.

“Don’t be afraid” the voice said. “I know you of old, and young as it happens and I know you to be a friend of mine. That is, of us all.”

The old man squinted trying to perceive better the shape of the light and of the voice. But he had no spectacles with him so the light remained distant.

“Why don’t you come and sit here next to me on this stump close by and we may talk a while.”

“Do I know you?” said the old man, surprised at how his fear had slipped away.

“Oh yes” came the reply. “You have seen me often, though I don’t think that you may have recognised me always.”

Now the old man rose stiffly to his feet. His knee ached and his ankle protested his body, but once upright he felt better as always he did.

“Walk towards me my friend” the voice assured. It was loving and calming. “Just take care of a few steps as you set off.”

The old gamekeeper took a step towards the thin light. Then two and three paces more before almost stumbling over a root. He steadied himself and as he closed on the dancing light he saw a strange face glowing softly in the beams cast.

In the darkness the features were strange. An old man’s face, as old and as lined as his own but with a wisdom of centuries beyond his. He wore a bushy dense beard, and in the soft light the voice’s eyes glowed deep green. The strange little man sat on a tree stump, and looking to his right gestured to another, no more than a man’s arm length away. The old man sat, half in wonderment, half he thought in dream.

For a long time the little man held the old man in a gaze, until at last the old man slowly turned to look at the dancing light that hovered a little to his right.

“Am I dreaming?” he asked as he looked in amazement at the tiny figure, no more that six inches high that fluttered almost silently in the air between them. It was sylph-like and delicate beyond gossamer, its wings

moved with grace and purpose, and the little body emitted a soft glow of light and thought the man, a little warmth.

“It is a dream of a sort” the strange man said, drawing the old man’s attention back, though not his sight. Then the old man asked of the sylph-like spirit hovering before him: “Are you some angel? Or fairy or what manner of spirit may you be?”

The strange man sitting on the tree stump answered him.

“Why so many questions my friend? Are you not weary of questions to which you already know the answers?”

“But I have never seen such a thing before in nature” he said and then, turning back to the strange man he said slowly; “But yes. I think I know you better now. I think I have seen you before,” and the old man looked deep into the stranger’s eyes.

The strange man now grinned a broad and happy grin.

“Then we are well met old friend” he said.

The old man now studied the strange bearded man, and saw that he was clothed in the roughest and dirtiest of cloth. A bare tunic covered his pot belly and his arms were skinny and bare. His face though was of all kindness. He did not shiver at all despite the cold.

“Yes, I know you” the old man repeated. “I thought I saw you down by the river last year. I took you for an otter, and a few years before that I saw you standing, almost hidden behind a thick fence post.”

He paused, thinking hard now. Revelation came to him slowly.

“And when I was a child, very young, I saw you both. And I swore to mother that I had, though no-one would believe me. Mother I said, I have seen a goblin and a fairy in the garden. Isn’t that so?” he said asking the strange man.

“Yes. I remember that well. Like it was yesterday” came the reply.

“I had forgotten that indeed” the old man said now sounding stronger and more youthful.

The strange man chuckled to himself in agreement.

“Though I am no goblin. You know that now don’t you? Though some may say I have the appearance of one of the mystic brethren.”

The old man looked up at his companion, unafraid.

“Yes. I know now.”

He looked around him trying to penetrate the dark to see if anything had changed but the light of the hovering creature outshone his efforts to peer more than a few feet away.

“Are you cold?” asked the strange man.

“As it happens,” said the old man, “not so much now.”

“Good. Soon you will never be cold again” and the strange, dark man patted him on the knee.

“Now” he continued, “you spoke of travel, or at least of a journey.”

“Did I?” said the old man, with honesty. Then he paused and said “Oh, yes. Yes I did.”

The strange man looked at him, and in those deep green eyes, the old man saw the bare wonderment of nature.

“Would you like to travel with me for a while?” he asked.

“Will it hurt?”

“No. It doesn’t hurt. Only life hurts, you know that my friend.”

The old man nodded an understanding. Then, with concern he asked: “Should I be afraid?”

The strange man blinked his eyes slowly.

“We didn’t fear where we came from, we are only returning.”

The old man’s eyes began to water, a tear escaped.

“I have been waiting for you for so long” he finally said. “I will travel with you, if you will take me. Please.”

“And you will be expected also” the strange man said. “There are others who have been waiting for you.”

The old man began to sob heavily now, as heavily as he had so many years ago.

“Can we go now?” he said, his words were tired but filled with hope.

“It is almost time” said the strange man softly.

“But wait” the old man said suddenly as if a vital thing had occurred to him. “Is it possible to see, or send a message to my niece? Or some such thing?”

“You have already said enough for her lifetime and more. She will not forget you in her heart.”

For a moment the old man seemed to hesitate. He was on the verge of stuttering some objection, some plea, when the strange and kindly man held out his hand.

The old man relented. He sighed as tears rolled down his face. His cheeks didn’t seem so cold now. He took the strange man’s hand and they both stood up. The forest was blacker than ever, and the old man could feel the soft carpet of pine needles crunch quietly on the ground beneath his feet.

“How will we know the way?” he asked.

“My friends will light us the way” said the strange man, and gently a path of lights began to glow before them leading off into the woods.

The strange man turned to the hovering sylph and said: “If you would lead the way we would be most grateful.”

The shimmering spirit buzzed quietly a little and move away in front of them to where the lights were shining.

“One last look perhaps” said the old man turning his head to where he had been working on the wire bird pens.

For a moment he stared. In the gloom there was no light, not even from the stars, but still the old man thought he saw a small patch of deeper darkness slumped on the pine needled earth. The tears were gone now. And his heart seemed lighter.

“Come, your task is done” said the strange man. “It’s time you rested. You have been so tired for so long.”

“Yes. Yes I have.”

For a few steps or maybe for many more, the old man and the strange man walked hand in hand along the row of floating lights. Each creature as different and as dazzling as the last with butterfly colours on their wings. They shone a little brighter now as the path led away down a slope the old man knew well. He knew there were badgers that used this path he thought as he walked.

“Don’t let me go” the old man said to his smaller companion.

“Never” he replied. “Not until there is another to take your other hand in welcome.”

At last they came to a wide opening in the trees, and the moon shone brightly upon a large wooden hall whose windows blazed with a welcoming red and yellow glow. They approached, and with each step the old man felt his sadness ebbing away and his heart filling with joy.

From such a distance they could hear a great merrymaking going on inside, and laughter and song filled the hall even to bursting.

The feasting grew louder as they approached the heavy wooden door.

The strange man knocked. A gentle tap tap tap, which the old man felt surely couldn’t be heard inside.

The door opened and already the old man was weeping tears of such joy as it drew back.

Before him stood his wife and his child, a girl already grown many years. As one they held their hands out to greet him.



The old man looked down at his strange friend.

“Thankyou” he barely managed to utter as he released the small hand that now he could see looked as polished oak.

The strange man nodded in gratitude of the old man’s thanks.

“You are young again. Go, have the peace and happiness you have been searching and waiting for all your life. It was never lost.”

As the old man, now young in features and muscle hugged his family with as much love as the stars could shine on them, the strange man turned, and within a few paces from the door, he was gone and the floating lights had disappeared.

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