

## Baron's Prologue

In the course of his travels a man may enter a forgotten byway and marvel to recapture a minutely remembered vista. He has been this way before. Against the autumn sunset looms a familiar hillock rising from the barley fields, aswarm in horsetail and crowned with an old, contorted beech, a many-armed alms-beggar. This is the selfsame dryadic shape whose heavenward plea once bore witness to cravings rampant in a horseman straining keen from the saddle. Now the returning traveller reins in his steed, eager to taste the hunger of those upthrust limbs grappling with the sky. But the gnarled demand speaks only to itself; the outflung arms convey an empty mendicancy.

The horseman, then, has divined that one may not take the same road twice, though he travel it again. Lest the landscape be stripped of evocations, he must seek always a fresh disclosure—noting, perhaps, beneath the tree a mandrake root and hearing in the imagined shriek of the unearthed homunculus an echo of his inner voice. Up ahead, where the road dips through a shallow brook, he will muse no longer on the floating maidenhair that once seized his fancy but on stones pebbling the stream-bed with a drowned, ironic gleam. And thus does he refuel the flame of his own ardency.

He will return home and speak of these things to the wide-eyed: milksops, aging lords, and women gathered hearthside to partake of his adventure. How shall he open the distances to these famished ones, who ride huddled in carriages bristling with armed footmen? Here and there a woman's listening eye may seem to flash with a heedful fire, but he knows it for illusion. What can she feel of the cinching-on of spurs, the wind in the hair, the vast wheeling of an unroofed night? Crimped and bejeweled, she sips at her sherry with a pensive effect, likely nursing her skepticism of his odd tale.

Shall he then persist? Why does the presence of the audience extort his tongue?

Perhaps he must speak to fix in his listener's sight a writhing beech before it devolves into an ordinary tree.