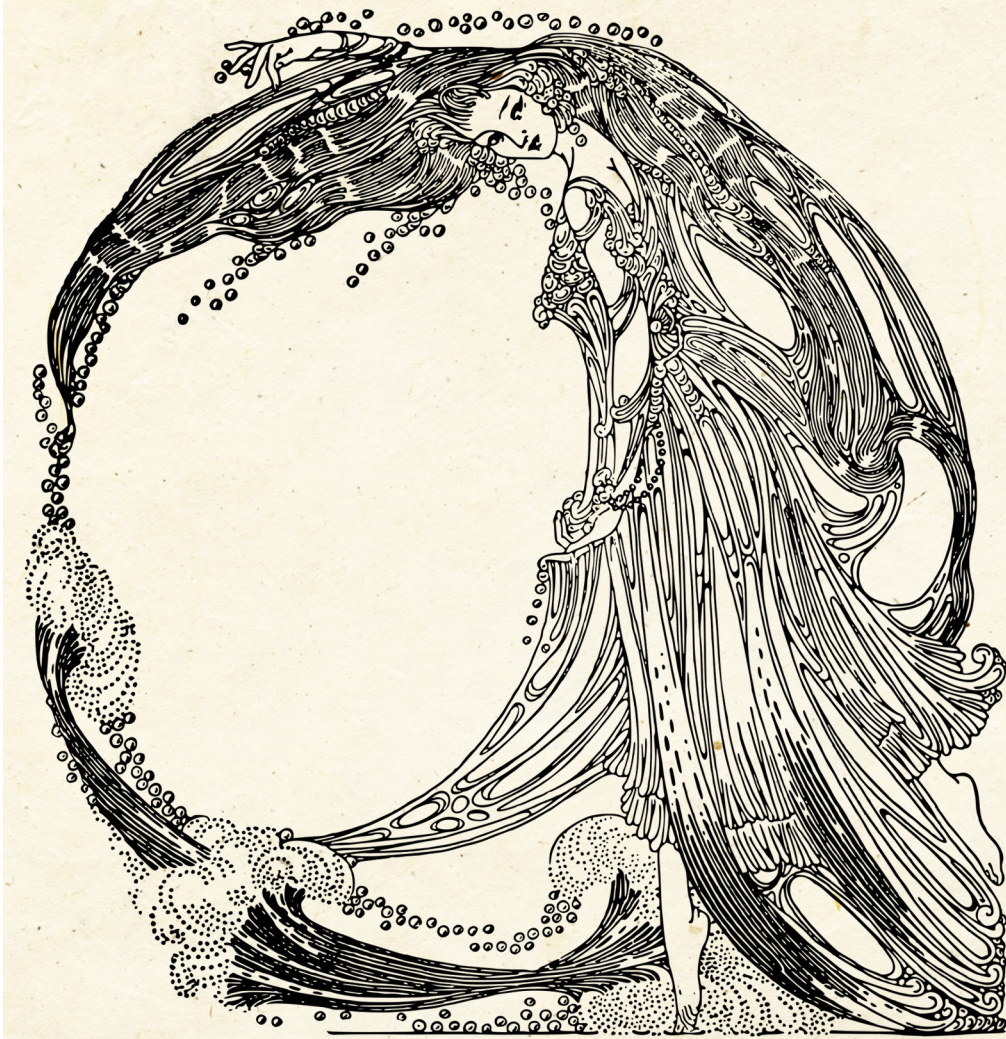




THE TREASURE

ELLEN READ



Dedication

My heartfelt thanks go to Eric Read for his constant support and proof reading.
Also, to Pauline Reid for her great support and for reading the ARC of *The Treasure*.

Copyright Notes

This eBook is licensed for your personal enjoyment only and may not be re-sold or given away to other people. If you would like to share this book with another person, please suggest they visit my website to download an additional copy for each recipient. EBooks are not transferable.

No part of this eBook may be used or reproduced in any manner without permission, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews. The unauthorized reproduction of this copyrighted work is illegal. No part of this book may be scanned, uploaded or distributed via the Internet or any other means, electronic or print, without the author's permission.

All Rights Reserved
Copyright 2019 Ellen Read
The Treasure

Cover Design
Ellen Read

ISBN: 9780994392763

About *The Treasure*

Matilda lives in a mythical land in a castle that once belonged to her parents. Until he died, her father had been Lord Chamberlain to King Stephen. Left alone, Matilda's mother married the man Matilda calls the Oaf. However, after her mother dies, Matilda's life becomes one of great hardship. Her step-father and his son mistreat her and make her life miserable.

The village of Oakvale, where Matilda lives, and its twin village of Elmswood suffer great adversity and poverty. For two hundred years there has been war, as the villagers fight each other for the wondrous treasure that is hidden somewhere in King Stephen's castle. After two centuries of bombardment, the castle is in ruins, except for one tower that remains impenetrable.

Alaric, an old, wizened man, is gatekeeper of King Stephen's castle and its remaining tower. Matilda visits him every afternoon. He is her only friend.

When the Oaf and his son make a final assault on the castle to find the treasure, all their lives are turned upside down.

The Treasure is a merging of two ideas.

First of all, Greek Myth of *Icarus* inspired me. However, the message behind the story comes from a poem I wrote years ago about greed, arrogance and, ultimately, love and peace.

The two ideas came together in *The Treasure*.

In Greek mythology, Icarus is the son of the master craftsman Daedalus, the creator of the Labyrinth. Icarus and his father attempt to escape from Crete by means of wings that his father constructed from feathers and wax. Icarus' father warns him first of complacency and then of hubris, asking that he fly neither too low nor too high, so the sea's dampness would not clog his wings or the sun's heat melt them. Icarus ignored his father's instructions not to fly too close to the sun. When the wax in his wings melted, he tumbled out of the sky and fell into the sea where he drowned, creating the expression *don't fly too close to the sun*.

This story is free on my website.

I hope you enjoy reading *The Treasure*.

THE TREASURE

Why were people so greedy? Surely two hundred years of wars was enough? Why fight over nothing?

The hard boot against Matilda's sore leg knocked the thoughts out of her head and propelled her onto the stone floor.

"Get up, girl!" the harsh voice commanded.

The man kicked her again.

"Get up, I said." He took her arm and wrenched her to her feet. "Do your chores instead of standing there daydreaming."

Matilda hung her head. Her dark hair fell over her thin shoulders and hid her face. Fear of him didn't dictate her actions. He could do little to hurt her now, really hurt her. Hatred of him kept her eyes on the bare stone floor, lest he should see it burning deep inside her. He grabbed a handful of her hair and wrenched her head backwards, forcing her to look at him.

"Do you hear me, girl?"

"Yes," she said through clenched teeth. She still refused to look at him.

"What do you say? Eh?" He shook her.

"Yes, step-father," she murmured. She pushed the hatred down. He never seemed to notice it simmering beneath the surface. Perhaps because she never looked at him in any other way, he assumed it was her normal expression.

"Say it again," he demanded.

When she hesitated, he pulled her head back further until she staggered and nearly fell.

"Yes, step-father." He forced her to always call him step-father as a mark of his domination over her. He owned her. She was his chattel. What did it matter to her? She could say step-father a million times a day but it was only lip service. In her mind, she never thought of him as such. She'd never sully the name of her real father in her heart. Her own much-loved father had been a kind and gentle man. This muscle-bound oaf was a pretender to the name. Why her mother had married him, she'd never know. Well ... she did know. When her father died from injuries sustained in so many senseless wars, her mother was left alone with a twelve-year-old daughter and a castle to run. Her mother had been beautiful and elegant, but she

played her harp far better than she could manage her accounts. Few women could stand-alone and survive.

Now, at seventeen, Matilda didn't blame her mother. The oaf had asserted himself and pushed his way into her father's castle. He'd brought his eighteen-year-old son with him. Oaf and his peacock. That's how Matilda thought of them.

After her mother had died, when she was thirteen, far worse names for them had jostled around in Matilda's head. The first time she'd called the oaf an oaf, he'd boxed her ears. It had taken days before she could hear again. Every time he shouted at her and she couldn't hear him, he struck her again, punched her, and kicked her.

Much later, when she'd screamed her hatred at him, he'd grabbed her hair, much as he did now, and dragged her along until they reached the top of the stairs. Then he'd thrown her down. She'd heard her right leg crack. The break had never properly mended. The peacock, in his fine tunic and hose, had stood at the foot of the stairs and laughed. They'd left her to the gentle mercies of Ethel, the cook, and her poultices.

Many months later, Matilda managed to climb the stairs to her bedchamber. She knew the oaf had axed her furniture. She'd heard the noise as he chopped it apart. Matilda had seen the bonfire from the kitchen doorway. He'd thrown all her clothes on as well. When her gaze had fallen on her empty bedchamber, it did little to add to the hollow feeling in her chest. She'd turned and gone back to the kitchen. With its large fireplace, it provided the only warmth she felt. It ... and Ethel. For a while she'd lain on the pallet Ethel had made up for her in her large, empty bedroom.

Another tug on her hair wrenched Matilda back to her present situation. Poor Ethel bit her lips and wrung her hands.

"When you've done your chores, bring food down to us at midday."

By down to us, he meant the dungeon. Matilda wished she could lock the door on the oaf and his peacock. She couldn't work out what they were doing down there. It had to be something important if the peacock was somewhere he might dirty his brocade tunic.

"Yes, step-father," Matilda said. Because of Ethel, she wouldn't defy him with her silence anymore. Poor Ethel worried over her.

The oaf released her so abruptly that Matilda fell backwards. Ethel ran to her and helped her to her feet.

"Are you hurt, my dear?" Ethel cried.

Matilda brushed straw off her ragged dress. Straw and lavender were strewn over the kitchen floor to help keep vermin at bay. Why she bothered with her dress, Matilda didn't know. She'd worn this same dress when she'd been pushed down the stairs. Over the years as Matilda grew, Ethel had unpicked seams and sown in mismatched panels. The hem had been let down and new material added to make a new hemline.

"Oh, my Lady, he kicked your injured leg."

Shock at hearing those two words ... my lady ... shot Matilda's head up. "Shh," she said, and wrapped her arms around the cook. "I'm unhurt but you must not call me that."

"Sorry, my La..."

"No," Matilda added in a charged whisper. "If the oaf hears you, he'll whip you."

Ethel sniffed back tears. Matilda knew they weren't because the woman feared the lash. Ethel dreaded Matilda would be beaten too.

"It shouldn't be like this, my dear." Ethel shook her head, and then pushed some grey hair back under her cap. "If your poor saintly mother knew ..."

"Let's be thankful she doesn't," Matilda said, and kissed the cook's cheek. Ethel had become a mother to her. "I'll get on with my tasks, while you cook some stew for the louts below. Make it tough enough to break a tooth," Matilda added, a wicked twinkle in her eye.

Just before midday, Matilda returned to the kitchen. She'd swept the main hall and spread clean rushes over the floor. The remaining servants, that the oaf hadn't forced to leave to be replaced by his own people, made certain Matilda didn't have to do the hardest jobs. If Alden, the oaf's brutish steward, found out, then they would all be whipped. So, Matilda did her fair share. She wouldn't have her parents' servants, her servants, beaten because she'd been slack.

The stew bubbled away in the huge metal pot over the fire.

"It's ready," Ethel said, as she spooned the meat, vegetables and gravy into wooden bowls.

Matilda often felt like spitting into their bowls but controlled her baser urges because she didn't want to be as bad as they were.

Ethel placed the bowls, along with wedges of grainy bread, and two mugs of ale, on a wooden tray. "Really, my dear, you shouldn't be ..."

"It's all right," Matilda assured Ethel before the cook could say anymore. Ethel always voiced her opinion that the scullery maid should carry the tray down the narrow stone stairs. "I can manage," Matilda added, and smiled.

In truth, Matilda had difficulty in negotiating the ancient and narrow staircase. At the best of times, her limp made it a treacherous descent, but holding a tray that prevented her from seeing where she placed her feet added a degree beyond dangerous. Not that the oaf cared if she broke her neck or not. He would only obsess if someone else had to carry the tray down and glimpse his secret project.

Matilda put the tray on the floor outside the dungeon door. She couldn't push the heavy door open and hold the tray.

"Are you by yourself?" the oaf fired at her as soon as she stepped into the cold, dark room.

"Yes ... step-father."

"Put the food on the table and go," he added.

Matilda limped to the table. She took her time off-loading the bowls and mugs, while her gaze flicked about the dungeon. Phantom cries from the darkened corners chilled her blood. Were they the agonised cries of men the oaf had tortured that cut through her? She thanked God she couldn't see the instruments of that cruelty. One day, the oaf would pay for his brutality.

As her gaze landed on the tall bulk of the man, she felt her hatred simmering behind her eyes. Disdain added to it when she looked at the peacock. His expression twisted in a mixture of displeasure at being forced into a cold dungeon that reeked of stale blood and an eagerness that lit his hazel eyes and baffled Matilda.

"This might work, father," he said, pointing at a mixture of feathers and sticks. Then he jumped back when he realised his tunic had touched the dirty work table.

"Of course, it will work!" his father snapped.

"Think of the glory, father."

The man looked inside a coarse sack. "We need more feathers."

"I shall fly high, father. High."

"Too high and you'll melt."

The young man raised his head and twirled on the spot. He grimaced when he fell against another table. “Why can’t we do this in an outbuilding?” he asked, his lower lip thrust out. “Where’s there’s sunlight.”

“Don’t be absurd, boy. Do you want everyone to know what we’re doing?” The oaf swung about and saw that Matilda hadn’t left. “What are you still doing here?”

He came towards her, a dark hulk towering above her.

“Get out,” he shouted. “And get more feathers.”

“We don’t have more feathers,” Matilda ventured to say.

He brought a heavy hand down across Matilda’s face. “Then find some.” Dark eyes glared at her. “And,” he added and grabbed her arm, “keep quiet about what you see here ... or you won’t have eyes to see anymore.” He threw Matilda away from him. The peacock simpered.

Matilda wasn’t afraid of them. Inside her head, she thought them stupid louts. Inside her head, she told them so. They couldn’t even tell that she hated them. She picked herself up and left them to their secretive pursuit.

Matilda threw some grain onto the ground for the chickens. A smile flitted across her lips at the thought that she’d saved these last six chickens from the oaf’s mad obsession with collecting feathers. Already, he’d killed another six and demanded their feathers be saved. Matilda had hidden these hens in a run she’d set up in the walled garden. The oaf and his peacock never came to it. The garden had become one of Matilda’s escapes. It was overgrown, and she left it that way as a deterrent to prying eyes. It had once been the showcase for her mother’s roses. Now they were nothing but dead branches, their thorns old and gnarly. For years, Matilda had tried to keep at least one alive but with continuous years of war, water became scarce and couldn’t be spared.

“That’s a good girl, Hetty,” Matilda coaxed her favourite chicken. Hetty was the runt of the henhouse, but a good layer. Matilda identified with the hen. Like the chicken, she was small for her age. For the most part, like all runts, she was spurned. Matilda didn’t have friends of her own age. Of course, her parents’ servants remained

loyal to her, and in the village, the older people looked past the urchin she'd become and saw the young lady from the castle.

Matilda put the bowl away, said goodbye to her fowl friends, and left the walled garden. The oaf knew she worked in the garden in the afternoon, so she could slip away without his notice.

A feeling of calm always fell over her like a cloak of happiness settling on her shoulders when she entered her father's woods. Tall trees welcomed her under their canopy, offering her protection, while a carpet of yellow lesser celandine, with their shiny star-like flowers and dark green heart-shaped leaves, tickled her ankles as she walked amongst them. She picked some flowers, making a note to pick more for Ethel on her return. The cook used the herb in her poultices and potions. It helped the common cold. However, these celandines were for someone else.

Where the woodland finished, Matilda stepped out onto open fields. A small hill dominated the cleared area. On a small plateau on the top of the hill stood the ruins of what was once the King's castle. It had been a far grander castle than her parent's owned. Her father had been Lord Chamberlain, as his father and his father had been before him. Such a lofty position had warranted a smaller castle than the monarch's but a castle no less.

War had changed everything. The king had been mortally wounded in the seventh war. Now his kingdom was no more. Even his grand castle lay in ruins. Only one tower remained. It soared two storeys above the plateau, seeming to be impregnable.

On the western side, the plateau fell away in a steep cliff. At the base of the cliff grew gorse bushes in spiny, compact, impassable hedges. Matilda loved to see the many birds and insects that took shelter amongst the spines and bright yellow flowers. An old, contorted juniper tree broke the line of gorse. It looked like the gorse hedge had swallowed the trunk of the juniper. Matilda looked about her to check no one else was in sight. Not that she expected to see anybody. Why would anyone want to look at the spiny gorse?

Matilda pushed her way through to the juniper trunk, edged behind it and then disappeared into the gorse. She had done this so often the thorns had ceased to grow where she ventured daily.

Behind the hedge, Matilda knelt and squeezed herself into a small opening in the hillside. Pain shot through her right leg, but it was always worth the effort. It only

took a minute to push through to a larger cave where Matilda could stand up, and a few more minutes before the pain eased. Then she bent and felt for the oil lamp, and flint and tinder box, she needed to give herself some light.

In this small, dark space, Matilda never felt the same chilling horror that cut through her in the dungeon. The cave's earth walls encompassed her with benign welcome. She lifted the lamp high and proceeded along a tunnel that led out the back of the cave. Very soon, she came to a junction, where the tunnel split into two. Matilda always took the right-hand tunnel. Why? She wasn't certain. Only that it was the way she knew.

Most of the tunnel was high enough for her to stand erect, although a man might have to stoop. The oaf would get stuck! Matilda smiled at the thought. However, she hoped he'd never find the cave and tunnels. As far as she knew, she was the only person to have discovered them.

The tunnel meandered through the base of the mountain. The thought of being inside the hill didn't frighten her, perhaps because she took the path so often. Then, the soft glow from her lamp revealed a set of steps rising into darkness far above. Who had chiselled out steps inside the hill, Matilda didn't know. The king, she supposed, as a secret way in and out of his castle.

One step at a time, Matilda climbed. She rested her leg part way up, and then, before she knew it, she was at the top. A wooden trapdoor was above her head. She placed the lamp down on a step and pushed on the panel above her. It creaked a protest, as it always did, and then fell backwards.

Matilda stepped out amongst the ruined walls of the castle. She closed the trapdoor with its lid of grasses and weeds. No one would suspect it was there at all. She wound her way through a maze of tumbledown stone, until she stood behind the remaining tower. Many years ago, another tower had stood opposite with a huge gateway between the towers. The king and his men, in their silver armour and with standards flying, would ride up the meandering road to the gatehouse where the gatekeeper would open the gates for them to enter the inner court compound.

The heavy wooden gates had long ago been burned down. The right-hand tower had suffered cannon bombardment and, after many years had yielded, its thick walls now no more than a heap of rubble that villagers stole from to fortify their own damaged homes.

The gatehouse, Matilda's destination, sat fifty yards out from the non-existent gates and was centred in the space. If Matilda walked directly at the small stone building with its slate roof, there was a good chance no one would see her enter. If they did see her, they'd probably shake their heads and mutter about the urchin from the castle. She never knocked on the door. It creaked as soon as she touched it, alerting its inhabitant. In any case, he knew she'd visit every afternoon.

It took a few moments for Matilda's eyes to adjust to the dark interior. A small fire burned in the fireplace that also served as a place to cook food and boil water. It didn't provide a great deal of illumination. She heard Alaric before she saw him. He stepped in front of the hearth and put the pot on to boil for tea. The flames caused a fiery aura to burn around his long brown cloak and tunic, and to send golden highlights through his long, unkempt grey hair.

When he turned, a small smile flitted across his lips. "You're late today," he said, but not unkindly.

Matilda pulled a wry face and shrugged. "The oaf gave me more tasks to do." She handed Alaric the wildflowers, which were bent and bedraggled as they always were by the time she traversed the tunnel and arrived here.

Alaric took the celandine from her. He placed them in a small wooden vase. He owned two vases, one for the flowers she brought today and one for those she'd brought yesterday. "Sit down, child," he said. "I'll make the tea in a minute." He already had a few hard biscuits on a plate for them to share.

Matilda sat on one side of the hearth in an old wooden chair, the back legs of which were propped up with old parchment. After he handed her a mug of tea, Alaric sat opposite her. "Camomile," Matilda said, after she taken a sip of scalding tea.

Alaric nodded. His hair fell forward as he sipped his brew, but Matilda could see his old, kind, wise eyes. They had always remained clear, which gave them a strangely youthful look, even though his skin had wrinkled and toughened over the years. Matilda had always known him. Her mother had known him. "How old are you, Alaric?" she asked.

He smiled at her abrupt question. "Well now, let me see. Nearly as old as the king's castle. Not quite as old as the start of the wars. Older than your grandfather but younger than my father."

Matilda laughed. "Of course, you'd be younger than your father. And the wars started two hundred years ago."

“It’s good to see you laugh, child.”

“You can’t have been alive two hundred years ago?” Matilda asked. She eyed his bony, wrinkled hands, and wondered.

“My grandfather was the gatekeeper two hundred years ago.”

“That still makes you very old,” Matilda said.

“I think I must be.” Alaric nodded his head.

“Isn’t it strange to be gatekeeper of a castle that’s in ruins? There isn’t a gate anymore.”

“I pledged to serve the late king and his castle while it still stands.”

“There’s only one tower left,” Matilda said.

“So, I must serve my king.”

“Even though the king and his son died in the wars?”

“Even though.” Alaric nodded.

“It’s remarkable that one tower remains. Through all the wars, no one has been able to damage it or destroy it.”

“Quite remarkable,” Alaric agreed.

“Of course,” Matilda added. “Everyone, in both villages, thinks the treasure must be in this tower.” She rose, took both empty mugs and washed them out. Through the window she could see the line of rocks that went from the back wall of the gatehouse down the hill, across the meandering roads and further through the grasslands, defining the border between the two towns. The line of rocks also went from the front wall of the gatehouse, cutting through the grass and the castle ruins. It left the solitary tower in Oakvale, Matilda’s village. Both Oakvale and Elmswood, the other village, used to be under the benevolent hand of King Stephen. Now the king was dead, and the villages fought each other to obtain the treasure that would bring them great wealth.

Matilda turned to look at Alaric. “Why do you think this tower has remained impervious to all the cannon balls and fires that have destroyed the rest of the castle?”

Alaric raised his bright eyes to meet hers. “Some say that the tower is bewitched, that King Stephen’s grandfather buried the treasure in the tower, and then King Stephen put an enchantment on it.”

“You’ve mentioned that before.” Matilda tossed the words around in her head. “Do you think that’s what happened?”

“I wasn’t there to know for certain.”

“Didn’t your grandfather or great-grandfather know and send word down through the generations?”

“I am only a humble gatekeeper, child, as were my ancestors.”

Matilda sat down and stared at the old man. “I don’t believe that for a second.”

Alaric laughed. “Such wisdom! You should be queen.”

“That’s not very likely.” Matilda laughed too. Then, she sobered and added, “Anyway, I don’t think anyone will rule again, and rejoin the villages in peace. I think everyone will keep fighting forever over nothing.”

“I always have hope,” Alaric said. “Hope, child, is one of the most important things in life. With hope, we take the next step forward. Just think, we have a clue to where the treasure is hidden.”

“What sort of clue is ... Right is not right?” Matilda pulled a wry face. “Everyone has known this clue for two hundred years, but it hasn’t helped.”

“They have known it,” Alaric agreed. “But everyone has chosen to fight over it instead. Everyone makes their own choices, child.”

“Do they?” Matilda’s head sprang up. “I don’t seem to have had much choice in my life.” She blinked hard to banish her tears. She didn’t cry often but when she did it was as if a floodgate opened.

Alaric gave her a minute before he commented, “Perhaps you have more choice than you think.”

Matilda’s gaze darted across to him. Alaric often uttered comments like that, comments that made no sense to her. “Do you know,” she said. “Your chair is really in Elmswood and mine is in Oakvale. We should be enemies. That just shows how stupid these wars are!”

“Very true, child, very true.”

Matilda took the bowls of stew, bread, spoons and mugs of ale off the tray and placed them on the table. One part of her wanted to hurry away from the dungeon and its fetid odour of past cruelty and misery, but curiosity won over. She inched her way back into the darkness where the oaf and his peacock couldn’t see her.

What were they doing?

When the oaf shouted at his son, Matilda jumped more than the peacock did.

“Put it down before you break it!”

“I think this will work, father,” the peacock said, as if his father hadn’t bellowed at him. “How high do you think I’ll be able to fly?”

Fly? Matilda screwed up her nose. She looked more keenly at the contraption the oaf worked on. It looked like a wing, a large wing.

“Help me here,” he ordered.

Matilda nearly reacted to his words. She held herself back just in time.

“I don’t want to get that wax on my brocades, father.”

“Why wear fine attire when we need to work?” The oaf shook his head. “Here, hold these feathers ... like so.” He positioned them on the timber frame and his son held them while the oaf poured hot wax on them to adhere them to the others.

“Ouch,” the son jumped back. “That burned me, father.”

“If you fly too close to the sun you’ll get burned.”

The young man’s eyes brightened. “Do you think I’ll fly so high?”

“The wax will melt if you do,” his father snapped.

“How wonderful it would be, though, father, to fly higher than anyone else has ever done.”

“You just concentrate on what you have to do. You only have to fly high enough to land on the tower roof and get us the treasure.”

Matilda sucked in her breath. She could hardly believe it!

“So that’s what they’re up to,” Matilda told Alaric that afternoon as soon as she walked in the door. She handed him the crushed celandine. They looked cheery despite having stalks bent. “They’re making wings, so the peacock can fly up to the top of the tower.”

Alaric chuckled as he placed the little yellow flowers in the spare wooden vase. “I’m not certain which of the two things is most amusing. That the pair of them thinks they can find the treasure by landing on the tower roof, or that they have the conceit to attempt to fly at all.” Alaric put the pot of water on the hearth to boil. “Sit down, child, and tell me how large these wings are.”

“They’re large, I think. It was only today that I saw some shape to what they’ve been making. On previous days, it was all just feathers and wax.”

“Wax and feathers,” Alaric repeated, and then laughed again. “This might be the last great assault on the tower,” he added.

“Do you think so?” Matilda asked, before it occurred to her that the old man’s words had been ironic. Nevertheless, she asked, “Would there be a way into the tower from its roof?”

“Yes, in all likelihood,” Alaric muttered. He handed Matilda her tea. “So, when will this great venture take place?”

“The wings appear to be nearly finished. I’m not certain how they’ll be strapped to the peacock’s body.” Matilda sipped her tea. “Mint,” she murmured. “Do you think they’ll be able to fly so high?”

Alaric shook his head. “Over the years, I’ve witnessed so many of man’s stupidities and hubris. Perhaps this will be the greatest folly.”

Matilda told Ethel about the oaf’s newest madness. Ethel giggled, which creased her old face in a way Matilda had never seen it. She caught a glimpse of what a younger Ethel would have looked like. It sobered her a little to think that Ethel had once been young and giggly. Why did we never think that behind an old face lies a young heart? It was the same with Alaric. When he laughed, he looked younger. Yet she couldn’t imagine his ancient frame as a young man.

When she descended to the dungeons and delivered their midday day meal to the crazy inventors, Matilda eased back into the shadows once more. The oaf was fitting straps to the wings. In truth, they looked a thing of beauty, something that could be admired for their craftsmanship, but not their practicality.

“Stand still,” the oaf told his son, as he lifted the frames of feathers and wax. His muscles strained as he placed them over the younger man’s shoulders.

The peacock’s knees buckled. “They are too heavy, father.”

“Do you want to fly or not?” The oaf fiddled with the straps, until they sat more easily on his son’s shoulders. “We will have to have a test flight ... tonight, so no one can see what we’re doing.”

Matilda crept out of the cold, dark room and left the men to their machinations. That afternoon, she told Alaric of this newest development. They decided Matilda should sneak out that night and watch them.

“But be cautious,” Alaric warned.

“I will,” Matilda promised him.

It was past midnight when Matilda heard noises. If the men were trying to be quiet, they weren't doing a good job of it. She waited until they'd gone to the dungeons and appeared again in the castle courtyard. The moon, not quite full, spilled enough light over the scene, so that, from her vantage point behind a common hazel tree - the only tree in the courtyard - Matilda could see what they were doing.

The oaf positioned the wings over his son's shoulders. At least the peacock wore simple, serviceable hose and tunic. His knees buckled as they'd done that morning. Then his father shoved him in the back. The younger man ran, but he didn't have his father's bulk and muscle, and soon stumbled.

Matilda could see the plan was to run across the courtyard until enough speed brought elevation. It didn't happen. The peacock came crashing to his knees, the heavy wings covering him, as a mother eagle's wings would fold around her chicks.

The oaf's anger was palpable even from this distance away. “I'll have to do it.” He pulled his son to his feet. “I'll have to fly. I can see that.”

“No, father, I want to fly.”

The oaf swung his arm and cuffed his son over the head. “Help me carry this damned contraption!”

Together, the men took hold of the wings and retreated to the dungeon. Matilda suspected the wings would need some repairs.

“They worked all night,” Ethel whispered to Matilda in the morning.

“Did you see them last night?” Matilda asked.

Ethel looked around in case father and son appeared. “I did. What in heaven's name are they trying to do?”

“You're not too far wrong when you say heavens, Ethel.” Matilda followed suit and gazed over her shoulder. “They want to fly.”

“The saints preserve us,” Ethel muttered, concern deep in her voice.

“They want to fly to the top of the tower and get the treasure.”

Ethel’s hand patted her chest. “Oh, my goodness! How I wish there was no treasure, no mention of treasure. What good has it done us?”

“It’s all right, Ethel,” Matilda said, and placed her arm around the older woman’s shoulders.

Ethel huffed out a sigh. “Well, you’d best get some food down to them to break their fast or he’ll be storming in here, shouting at us.”

Matilda nodded and lifted the prepared tray.

When Matilda pushed open the dungeon door, the oaf glanced her way.

“About time,” he said. “Put the food down and go.”

His eyes were red rimmed. There was a crazed look in them that Matilda hadn’t seen before. The peacock slumped on the floor. He’d thrown sackcloth down to lie on.

“Wait!” the oaf commanded before Matilda could leave. “You can help us. Wake your brother.”

Matilda glared at the hulk of a man before her. Brother? She didn’t have a brother, but she knew whom he meant. This would be fun. She crossed to the sleeping youth, kicked his foot and told him to wake up. He didn’t stir. She kicked harder. He moaned. A third kick brought his head up.

“Leave me alone, you bi...”

“Get to your feet!” his father commanded. “We have to try this again.”

“Are they mended?”

Matilda gazed at the small clumps of feathers on the floor. The smell of hot wax and hot feathers should have spoken for itself.

“Help the girl and I to lift the wings outside. They’re still fragile.”

Matilda didn’t know how many times she was pushed into the dungeon walls as they manoeuvred the wide spread wings. They didn’t attempt to ascend the narrow stairs but took the feathered frame through the external dungeon door.

When they were in the courtyard, the peacock cried out, a bit like his namesake, “It’s daylight. How can we keep the wings secret if everyone can see?”

“The time has passed for secrets. Today we fly for real.”

“What?” The youth planted his heels in the dirt.

“We’re going to the king’s castle,” his father told him.

“We can’t. I couldn’t even get off the ground last night.”

The peacock turned a shade of green that was also close to his namesake. Matilda felt no sympathy for the youth. He'd done nothing but make her life a misery.

"You'll fly this morning, boy."

Matilda pursed her lips. What on earth did the oaf have in mind? Ethel came to the kitchen door. Matilda shrugged her shoulders as they went by.

By the time they'd carried the wings to the base of the hill and wended their way up the meandering road to the top, they had drawn a crowd of people, who fell into step behind them. Friend and foe mingled amongst the castle ruins, curiosity overcoming their hatred of each other. Although, Matilda guessed, those people from Oakvale harboured kinder thoughts than those from Elmswood.

As the peacock's friends crowded round him, his greenish complexion cleared. He swaggered and puffed out his chest. This was the peacock Matilda knew. He pranced and boasted how he was going to fly.

Matilda stepped back from them. As she reached the castle gates, she found herself beside Alaric. She gasped. "I don't remember ever seeing you outside of your cottage."

"There is always a first time for everything," he muttered.

The bright sunshine showed the old man's lined face in sharp relief. Matilda thought it aged him. He had to be one hundred. He looked even more.

"What folly are they up to this fine morning?" Alaric asked.

"The oaf told the peacock he has to fly," Matilda said. "They made an attempt at it last night and failed."

"What folly it is to imitate the majestic flight of a bird with feathers and wax." Alaric shook his head.

Matilda was about to agree when the oaf shouted out for her. She pushed her way through the crowd. This had better work today or someone would have a red face, and she would have a sore back by the time the oaf had vented his fury on her.

"Hold the other tip of the wing, girl, while I hold this end," the oaf ordered her.

Matilda did as she was told. She gazed about her. The hilltop was crowded. It seemed everyone from Oakvale, Elmswood and even the surrounding smaller villages, came to watch and jeer. A large group of Elmswood men did just that.

“Shut up, you louts,” the oaf roared at them, “and get out of the way.” He pushed through the mass of people, which forced the peacock to walk backwards with the weight of the contraption on his back. “Out of the way!” The oaf continued to shout. He kicked out at people who refused to move.

Matilda shook her head. Her stomach churned. Nothing good would come of this.

“Keep the path clear,” the oaf shouted out above the din. He lowered the wing he held to the ground. Then, to his son, he said, “Run as fast as you can. Do you hear?”

“Yes, Father. I want to fly.”

“Keep running, and then jump.”

“Jump where, Father?”

“Off the edge, you fool.”

“Off the edge of the hill?” The youth’s skin tinged grey. “But I’ll fall down, Father.”

“You’ll fly.” The father’s eyes gleamed manically.

As much as Matilda couldn’t stand either man, she felt sorry for the son at this moment. His father expected him to jump off the cliff that fell sharply to the gorse bushes below. It could mean the peacock’s death. “He can’t jump off the edge,” Matilda said, and lowered the wing she held. “It’ll kill him.”

The oaf glared at her, but said, “Run, boy, run!” He pushed his son in the back. “Fly, boy!”

The oaf’s voice resonated out over the hilltop. The crowd fell silent as they watched the young man run, trying to avoid low foundation stones of the original castle.

Matilda ran too, as best she could with her limp. What stupidity was this! She overtook the youth, stopped at the cliff’s edge and turned to watch him. Like his father, a crazed gleam smeared across unfocused eyes. Perhaps, at the last, the peacock believed he would fly. However, as he took his last step on solid ground and jumped into the air, his final expression before he fell was terror.

The oaf peered over the cliff and watched his son hit the gorse bushes far below. Matilda leaned over too but couldn't see any movement from the peacock. A twisted mass of feathers and timber buried him.

"Noooo!" his father roared, and then his voice was swallowed by the laughter behind him.

Enemies became friends in their shared hilarity.

The oaf swung around. Anger built until veins protruded from his neck and his face turned an ugly shade of puce. Then he roared and charged at the throng. He swung his arms and hit friend and foe alike. Others joined in until everyone, women and children too, fought each other.

Matilda ran to where Alaric stood. "This will cause another war," she cried.

"I fear you might be right, child."

"Look at them! Any excuse to fight." One pair of combatting children came close to where they stood. Matilda pulled them apart. "Go home," she shouted at them. "Get out of here."

The children looked wide-eyed at her but did as she ordered.

Matilda turned back to Alaric. "What of the peacock? His father would rather battle those who laughed at him than go to his son's aid."

"Such are the ways of men," Alaric said, and shook his head.

"I'll go to him," Matilda said. "He might be dying."

"Yes, go, child."

Matilda looked around her. Ethel and some of their household - her father's people - milled around the tower, in an effort to avoid being drawn into the fight. Matilda took Ethel's hand and indicated to the others to follow her. She hurried down the meandering road until they reached the bottom.

Ethel grabbed her side and gulped in deep breaths.

"Sorry, Ethel," Matilda murmured, "but we must hurry to see if the peacock is hurt. Come around the hill when you're able. The rest of you, follow me," Matilda added.

They easily found the warped sculpture of broken timbers, feathers and wax. No movement came from it. Matilda thought the worst had happened.

"Let's remove this contraption," she told the men with her. "But with care. He still may live."

When they reached the youth, and laid him on the ground, his chest fluttered like a butterfly's wing.

"Take him back to the castle," Matilda instructed the men. "Ah, Ethel," she added, when the woman approached. "Go with them and tend to him."

"Aren't you coming too, child?" Ethel's eyes widened.

"I must try to stop this fighting," Matilda said. She didn't know how but she couldn't bear to think of another war starting up on the hilltop. "I must do something. Go, Ethel," she added.

"Yes, my Lady," Ethel bobbed her head.

The use of her title was not lost on Matilda.

When everyone had gone, Matilda gave a last look around and disappeared behind the juniper tree. The gorse bushes swallowed her as they'd done the peacock. Poor vain idiot! Matilda pushed through the cave's entrance and into the larger cave, and then felt for the flint and tinderbox to light the lamp. Once done, she made her way through the tunnel that ran under the hill. It was the quickest way to reach the hilltop. She only hoped no one would see her emerge as it would give her secret away. She bargained on the fact they'd all be too busy trying to injure and kill each other.

Matilda stopped when she reached the fork in the tunnel. She rarely hesitated but something made her stop. She looked down the darkened left-hand tunnel. She'd never taken it. The right hand one had always felt right.

Right! The word resounded in Matilda's head, bashing around her brain. Right. What was the one clue to finding the treasure? Right is not right. How inane it had always seemed to her, and to everyone. Right is not right. But ... what if the right-hand tunnel wasn't the right way to go? Where would the left-hand tunnel lead?

Matilda made an instant decision. She'd go left. Perhaps left was right, meaning the correct way to go. At first, the tunnel seemed unremarkable. Cold and dark, with a damp, earthy smell, it led upwards with a gentle slope. Then, as with the right-hand tunnel, she came to a set of steps, narrow and steep. She kept the lamp with her, although once or twice she nearly dropped it, as she had to grab the moist dirt wall for support lest she fall. Then, she came to the end of the stairs. She hit her head on the dirt floor above her before she realised it. She placed the lamp on the top step and pushed on what she hoped was a trapdoor. It wouldn't move. Matilda leaned over and put her shoulders and back behind a final heave.

It moved. Matilda climbed the final step and pushed the trapdoor further until it flopped backwards with a crash. Dust and debris fell on Matilda's head. She stepped up into another darkened cave. Her heart sank. She'd expected to step out into the middle of the melee she felt certain still continued. When she reached down and brought up the lamp, she saw she stood on a timber floor. She gazed about her. The lamp's glow meagrely stretched out to stone walls.

She stood in a room. An empty room, it seemed. Matilda felt her way around the wall. She came to a corner and then proceeded along another wall. Where on earth was she? Where had the left-hand tunnel taken her? The air smelled dusty but with dry, old dust. Who had last breathed it in?

Then Matilda turned another corner and a tall candelabra, complete with partly used candles fell under the glow of her lamp. Matilda placed her lamp on a long table that sat between this candelabra and another. She took down one candle, lit it from the lamp, and then proceeded to light all of the candles from that first one.

The light illuminated the entire room.

Ancient stone walls surrounded her. In that instant, Matilda knew. She'd surfaced inside the one remaining tower. The tower that couldn't be destroyed, that no one could enter from the outside. A door didn't exist ... but it did. Matilda could see the ancient oak door and handle, although she knew nothing outside the stone walls showed this.

The sound of an explosion penetrated the walls and shook Matilda. Canons must have been brought up to the hill top. The villages were trying to bombard the tower. Some dust trembled from the walls. Otherwise they remained sound.

Matilda crossed to the long table. A small wooden chest reinforced with steel edges sat centre stage on it. Matilda's breath sucked in and she felt as if a cannonball had hit her in the chest. Her knees hardly supported her.

Could this be it? This small chest? Could this be the treasure? Had it been in the tower after all? All these years, so close but totally unattainable?

When Matilda laid her hands on it, a charge from it, as if lightning had hit her, zapped through her body and fastened her to the spot.

Then another external shock from cannon fire caused her to quiver. This had to stop. She lifted the chest from the table, crossed to the door and opened it. She stepped out onto the hilltop. A spray of blood hit her tattered dress as another person fell injured at her feet.

Everyone close to her stopped fighting. Like a wave that rolled backwards, gradually silence covered the hilltop as a pall of curiosity fell on the combatants. She could only imagine her expression, as her gaze narrowed with her anger.

“That is the last drop of blood that will be spilled!” Matilda said, her voice soft but its edge of command caught everyone’s attention.

Alaric came to stand beside her. “What do you hold, child?” he asked, although he looked as if he knew.

Matilda thrust the chest towards him. “The treasure.”

Only the oaf moved, strode through the stationary villagers, and attempted to take the chest from the old man.

Matilda stepped in front of Alaric. “This is not yours,” she said.

The oaf thrust Matilda aside and wrenched the chest from Alaric’s grasp. “It’s not yours,” he said. He attempted to lift the lid. When it wouldn’t budge, he hit it, and tried to smash it with his huge fist. “Where’s the key?” he demanded of Alaric. Then he turned to Matilda. “Where is it?”

“Do you see a keyhole?” Matilda raised an eyebrow at him.

“Insolence!” the oaf shouted. He would have struck Matilda had Alaric not stepped between them.

“There is no key,” Alaric said. “Only the rightful monarch can open the chest.”

Other men shoved the old man aside. Then they all fought over the small box. Some took rocks and tried to smash it. Some used axes to attempt to cut it apart. Nothing succeeded. The endeavours soon turned to fisticuffs and swords.

Matilda saw a pistol discarded on the ground. She took it, climbed a low rock wall that was still attached to the tower and fired into the air. It had the desired effect. Everyone looked around. “Enough!” Matilda shouted.

Alaric pushed through the mob and wrenched the chest from the hands of an Elmswood man. “This chest has no borders surrounding it.”

When the man moved to reclaim the chest, Alaric raised one hand. Matilda couldn’t see Alaric’s gaze, but it froze the man’s movements.

Alaric returned to the tower. Matilda eased herself down and dropped the pistol. His next words startled her.

“You open it, child.”

Matilda stared into his ancient eyes. A mixture of age, wisdom and youth swirled in their depths. “Me?” she murmured.

Alaric placed the chest on the ruined wall Matilda had stood on. “Open it,” he said, his tone kind and encouraging.

A rolling murmur came from the throng. Again, Alaric’s gaze quietened them.

Matilda placed her hands on the chest. As it had done before, a charge of energy shot through her. How to open a chest without a key? No keyhole existed, in any case. The lid showed a clear definition where it should separate from the base. Matilda put her hands on either side of the lid, and with a little pressure, she lifted it. The chest stood open. A collective gasp swirled over the plateau.

Matilda cut a glance to Alaric. The same wonder she felt radiated from his eyes.

“Go on, child,” he whispered.

She reached inside the chest and withdrew a rolled parchment, fastened with a royal seal.

“What else is in there?” the oaf stepped forward.

“Nothing,” Matilda told him.

“Where’s the treasure?” he demanded. He pushed past Matilda, lifted the chest, turned it upside down and shook it.

“Perhaps this is the treasure,” Alaric said.

“A scroll?” The oaf’s face twisted into an ugly grimace. He closed the distance between them and grabbed Alaric’s tunic front.

Matilda bent to grab the pistol and pressed it hard into the oaf’s side. “Let him go,” she warned. “Now. And stand aside while I read the scroll.”

The oaf stepped back and thrust out his chin.

Once again, Matilda climbed to the top of the ruined wall. She broke the seal. A smaller parchment separated itself from the larger, outer parchment. Matilda read the larger scroll first. *“I write this with a heavy heart. Since my grandfather told his people that he had bestowed a treasure on them, the kingdom has crumbled beneath continuous battles. Even as I write, cannons bombard my castle. I am in fear of my life. Greed has sown seeds amongst all men and harvested a crop of misery. My people, whom I have loved and cherished, now turn on me.”*

“I called for the witch from the woods and commanded her to cast a spell over the tower in which I leave these parchments. At my behest, she enchanted the

gatekeeper ...” Matilda paused and looked at Alaric. He didn’t meet her gaze.

“Enchanted the gatekeeper,” she continued, “to show the way to the one who is kind and pure of heart, and who will one day break the spell and the enchantment. To the one who deserves to rule as monarch and bring our lands, torn with strife, together again. Signed King Stephen the Third.”

Matilda lowered the parchments. “Alaric?” she asked.

“Read the other parchment,” he said.

Her chest pounded as if a hammer struck her. She lifted the smaller parchment, and read, *“Now, as my death approaches, I leave to my people, the greatest treasure in life.”* A murmur tumbled through the throng. Even now, the word treasure sparked a reaction. *“I bestow on them the most wondrous thing in the world,”* Matilda continued. *“Love. I pray you enjoy peace and prosperity but most of all, love. Signed King Stephen the First.”*

Matilda’s hand dropped, as did her jaw. The crowd’s murmur turned into a dull roar. The treasure didn’t exist. Not in the way that generation after generation of people had believed. They expected gold and jewels, not words of love, peace and prosperity. Matilda knew she’d laugh if tears weren’t stinging her eyes.

“No treasure,” the oaf shouted. He strode to where Matilda still stood on the ruins and wrenched the parchments from her hand. He read the smaller parchment and tossed it aside.

Alaric picked up the parchment and held it aloft. “This is your treasure.”

The crowd roared.

“Quiet,” Matilda shouted. “Quiet.” Her new energy burned from her eyes. Her spirit soared. “You have fought and killed for years for nothing. You have destroyed your homes, this castle. You’ve crippled our trade and ruined our crops. We have starved and had little water. Your children have died of scurvy, and even worse diseases. Your old people are skin and bone.” Matilda took the parchment from Alaric’s hand. “What for? This!” she called out. “A wish for love and peace from your king.” She lowered her arm and stared at the throng. “All of you ... yes, all of you, have lusted over gold and gems. You’ve created precisely what your king didn’t want to happen. And why?” She looked into the eyes of those close to her, ending with the oaf. “Greed. Folly. Hubris.” Matilda shook her head. “Go home. It is finished. No more blood will be shed.”

“Wait,” Alaric called and stopped everyone from moving. “You are all missing one point.”

He looked up with loving eyes at Matilda. “You, child, are the one who is kind and pure at heart. You are the one to rule these people and bring peace to your lands.”

“Me?” Matilda questioned and climbed down from the wall. “I’m not pure at heart. If you knew how much I’ve hated the oaf and ...”

“You hated them for what they did to your parents, their land and their people. You are the one, child. You opened the chest. King Stephen the First bestowed his monarchy on you.”

The hush was a solid sound, loud and awed. Some people fell to their knees. Others followed. Before a minute was passed, most had bent the knee to Matilda, who stood tall and proud in her rags.

Matilda felt the same awe. She accepted this honour, this task of bringing peace to King Stephen’s lands. Her lands. She looked at her people. “Go home,” she said with kindness. “Rest. Tomorrow we rebuild our lives and our community.”

Matilda still slept that night in the kitchen, even though Ethel protested. “You are our queen now, my Lady.”

“Who needs a good sleep in a bed that is warm,” Matilda said, and kissed Ethel’s cheek. “The kitchen is adequate. There is time for me to sleep upstairs again.”

Matilda didn’t know where the oaf slept. He didn’t return to the house. His son slept in the kitchen too, on a small cot that had been set up for him. Ethel’s potions had dulled his pain and sent him to sleep.

In the morning, Matilda woke early. She’d barely slept, her thoughts whirled in her head like a dust storm. Ethel was awake and preparing their normal breakfast of oats and milk.

“An egg for you, my Lady,” Ethel said. “Hetty laid this one especially for you.”

Matilda smiled. She wasn’t comfortable with being called my lady, far less thinking of herself as queen, but she accepted it. It made Ethel happy. The cook sang as she lowered the egg into boiling water.

“I’ve given the young lad more laudanum to help him sleep,” Ethel said, as she placed the boiled egg in front of Matilda.

“I wonder where the father is?”

As if he’d been called, the oaf stepped into the kitchen doorway, blocking out the gentle sunlight.

“You wait outside,” Ethel told him, “until my Lady has eaten.”

He went too, although whether it was because of yesterday’s turn of events or the wooden spoon Ethel brandished, Matilda didn’t know. She smiled and ate her egg.

When she’d finished, Matilda found the oaf outside. He’d washed his hands and face in the well but, by the smell of him, he must have slept in the barn overnight. He hung his head and wouldn’t look her in the eye. Would she still see some resentment or scorn? Or was he afraid of what would happen to him now?

“Go in and see your son, although he sleeps. Then ...” Matilda hesitated. What was she going to do with him? Banish him? It was the most sensible thing. She continued, “You are not welcome here. This is my castle. Other than to see your son, you are not to step inside.” Still he wouldn’t look at her. “Go to the old thatcher’s cottage. It needs work to make it habitable. When you’ve done that, take your son and live there.” He raised his head, his expression one of surprise. “If you cause any trouble,” Matilda added, “the slightest amount of trouble or unrest, you and yours will be banished from our lands.”

“My belongings?” he asked.

For a moment, she felt like saying that she’d smash them to bits like he did to hers and her parents’ belongings. Instead, she said, “When you take your son, you can take them.”

He nodded his head and mumbled.

Matilda was surprised that he accepted his new lot without resistance. He was about to turn away, when she added, “Your son? Don’t you want to see him?”

“Yes,” he muttered.

“Have you ever done blacksmithing?”

“Of course not,” he replied, his tone bolder. “I ...”

“Then you can learn,” Matilda held his gaze. “We will have need of blacksmiths to rebuild our lands.” His jaw worked, and she thought that she still could have trouble with him. “Don’t flout me,” she added, her voice strong. It was the voice of a queen.

He'd barely stepped inside to see his son when a group of villagers approached. Matilda's stomach took a dive. Not more trouble! As they came closer, Matilda saw the weapons they held. No, not weapons ... tools. Their expressions were benign.

Ethel hurried out of the kitchen, no doubt worried.

They stopped ten feet in front of Matilda. A spokesman bowed to her.

"My Lady," he said. "We have come to offer you our skills. We are stonemasons, blacksmiths, gardeners and thatchers who have not practised our trades, other than in the pursuit of war, in a long time. We will rebuild your castle and tend your gardens."

Matilda could hardly believe her ears. The spokesman was from Elmswood. Had the villagers buried their rivalry so rapidly? "Thank you, thank you," she said, and smiled at her people. It still felt strange to think this way. "But we have your villages to rebuild, fields to plough, harvests to sow."

"There are many who can do that, my Lady," the man said. "Everyone decided, people from both Oakvale and Elmswood, have agreed that your castle should be rebuilt. As our Queen, you should be comfortable and able to rule us with dignity."

Matilda felt tears sting her eyes. "What's your name?" she asked.

"Robert, my Lady."

"Well then, Robert, please proceed." Matilda's gaze swept the entire group of people. "Thank you all."

Everyone bobbed a curtsy and then dispersed to attend to his or her tasks. Ethel followed them. "Start with my Lady's bedchamber," she ordered. "Follow me."

Matilda smiled. She was about to return inside when a young woman stepped closer to her. She was short and had obviously been hidden amongst the group of villagers.

"My lady," the young woman said. Her hands shook. "I am a seamstress. May I make you a new gown?"

"What is your name?" Matilda asked. When the woman told her it was Mary, Matilda added, "I thank you, Mary, but I don't have any material to make a ... Wait! Perhaps I do. Come inside."

Matilda led Mary into the main hall and halted in front of the mullioned windows. She shook out the red and gold damask curtains with a floral motif and turned to the seamstress. "Can you make a gown out of this, Mary?"

"I believe I can, my Lady."

"Good. I'll have the curtains taken down and beaten clean of dust. Then you may start."

The castle became a hive of activity, and by the afternoon, Matilda was pleased to escape it. She saw no reason to not visit Alaric, as was her habit, just because she was queen and he a gatekeeper. Still in her patched and tattered dress, she decided to push through the gorse, step behind the juniper and, one last time, she made her way through the tunnel to the hilltop. She'd even picked some yellow celandine for Alaric's cottage. She suspected this would have to be the last jaunt through the tunnel. She could hardly do it in damask and silk gowns.

The gatekeeper's cottage looked dark inside as she stepped into the doorway, but Matilda caught sight of Alaric in front of the hearth, placing the pot on to boil for their tea. The fire's embers cast a golden aura about him. Matilda sucked in her breath. This wasn't Alaric! She was inside the cottage now and could better see. This man was taller, broad-shouldered, and younger.

Where was Alaric? Had he gone without saying anything to her? He was the one who'd led her to the treasure. Had he considered his task done?

Last night, as thoughts crashed about in her mind, she hadn't been able to resolve the puzzle that Alaric was to her. The letter from King Stephen had indicated that he'd had a witch put an enchantment on the tower and the gatekeeper. Who was the gatekeeper? Alaric's grandfather? Great-Grandfather? She couldn't fathom it.

"Who are you?" Matilda demanded.

The man turned. The fire outlined his silhouette. It lit his shoulder length dark hair, but his face fell into shadow.

Matilda felt alarmed. Her breath quickened. "What are you doing here?"

"Should I be elsewhere, my Lady?" His voice was rich and warm.

"Where is Alaric?"

"I am here."

The young man spoke. Or did he? Matilda gazed around the cottage. “Where is he?” she implored.

The man stepped closer to her and reached out for her hands. Matilda snatched her hands away.

“Come then,” he murmured, and beckoned her to the fireplace.

After a moment, Matilda went. She remained wary.

He stood side-on to the flames. They flickered over his face. “Don’t you recognise me?” he asked.

Matilda stared at him. He was young, probably twenty-five years old, tall, broad chested. She’d never seen him before. How could she recognise him?

Then he smiled and the warmth that radiated from his eyes embraced Matilda. His eyes. They were Alaric’s eyes, warm and kind, old and young. She’d seen this expression many times.

“Alaric?” Matilda murmured. “How can this be?”

“Please, sit down,” he said, smiling still. “Let me take the celandine and put them in the vase. Did you still come here through the tunnel?”

Matilda sat down heavily into the wooden chair. The words sounded like Alaric’s words, but she couldn’t comprehend what was happening. Matilda watched him as he placed the little yellow flowers in the wooden vase and set it on the small table. While Matilda tried to grapple with this new development, the young man made their tea, handed her a mug and then sat opposite her.

“Camomile,” Matilda said, as she always did.

“Indeed,” he agreed. “I thought something calming was called for.”

“I don’t understand,” she murmured.

“You read the letter, child.”

Matilda’s eyes shot up when he called her child.

“King Stephen had the witch place an enchantment on me, his gatekeeper, so that I could lead the right person to the treasure.” He sipped his tea, and then leaned forward, resting his arms on his legs, the mug between his hands. “The enchantment is broken.”

“So, you are not old anymore?”

He chuckled. Just as Alaric always laughed. “My body aged but inside a younger version of me still existed.”

Matilda could see it now. How often had she looked into his kind eyes and seen an old soul with a glint of youth behind it? “So ... this is how you looked when the witch enchanted you?”

“It is, but I am still the same person, inside. The one you have visited and talked to all these years. I’ve watched you grow into a fine young woman, a beautiful young woman.”

The blush rose hot onto Matilda’s cheeks. “Oh, my goodness!” She bit her lower lip. “I can’t believe the nonsense I’ve prattled on about.”

Alaric chuckled.

“It didn’t seem so bad when ...”

“When I was an old man?” he suggested.

Matilda placed the mug down and put her hands to her hot cheeks.

“I suspect now,” Alaric almost whispered, “you will not visit as often ... if at all?”

Matilda stared at him. He’d lowered his chin and he gazed at the floor. Why not? Why shouldn’t she visit him? The answer came with another blush. She was queen and he a gatekeeper. “No, I won’t be coming here anymore,” she whispered. When his head sprang up, she added, “Not here.”

“I understand,” he said, and managed a tight smile.

“Because you must move to my castle’s gatehouse and be my gatekeeper. The house will need to be repaired, no doubt.” Matilda smiled. “I’m certain you’ll be able to make it habitable.”

“Are you certain?” he asked, his tone brighter, hopeful.

“Of course. I need a gatekeeper. Who else would I have?” Matilda rose. “You must start straight away.”

Alaric rose to tower above her. She’d have to accustom herself to this young man.

“Allow me to escort you back to your castle.”

“You’re not disappointed to leave your cottage?”

“Not at all. It belongs to another time. We must move forward to the future.”

They walked together down the meandering road. Matilda couldn’t stop herself from stealing glances at him. Imagine Alaric being handsome! She smiled to herself. Then she came to an abrupt halt.

“My Lady?” he questioned.

“Did I ever say anything to you ... you know, the old you ... that was embarrassing?” Matilda wracked her mind.

Alaric chuckled and kept walking. He looked back over his shoulder and laughed, his eyes twinkling.

She knew it! Matilda limped after him. What on earth had she said to him? Perhaps it was worth it to hear his warm laughter. When she reached him, and gazed up into his eyes, she thought of all she would say to him in the future.

About other Short Stories

Alexandra & Edith's Escapades - The Diamond Ring

This is a stand-alone short story about an adventure Alexandra Thornton and Edith Blackburn from *The Dragon Sleeps* get unexpectedly caught up in.

Although Thomas Thornton and Benedict Archer are in it, they only play a minor part.

This story is free on my website as a PDF.

An Ordinary Man

This is another short story for FREE on my website.

ellenread.com

Love The Gift

About Love The Gift

Can a woman who has been dead for over one hundred years help Mark come to terms with the grief he feels over his mother's death and find the woman he's always loved?

Love The Gift, my first novella, is available on Amazon, [Apple iBooks](#), [Barnes and Noble](#) [Kobo](#), and other fine eBook retailers.

The Dragon Sleeps *Book 1 in The Thornton Series* *Published by Crimson Cloak Publishing*

About The Dragon Sleeps

A Dragon statue. An ancient sword. A body in the orchard.

What secret has remained hidden at Thornton Park for the last eighty years?

It's 1927 in Victoria, Australia. A time after the Great War when women have more options opened to them.

At a weekend house party at Thornton Park, Alexandra Thornton decides to break the news to her father that she wants to be an antiques dealer, like her father, grandfather and great-grandfather before her.

Guests include Zhang Huo, the Chinese antiques dealer who, with his son, has brought a Ming dragon statue from China for Thomas Thornton, Alexandra's father.

Benedict Archer, manager of Thornton Antiques in Melbourne, is also invited.

When Edith Blackburn, her friend since childhood, points out to Alexandra that Benedict is attracted to her, Alexandra can't believe it.

Then a body found in the orchard, and before the weekend is over, a priceless artefact is stolen.

Alexandra is determined to discover how these things are connected to the Ming dragon and the antiques her great-grandfather brought with him from Hong Kong so many years ago.

What treasure is worth killing to possess?

The Dragon Sleeps is available at:

<http://myBook.to/DragonSleeps> (Amazon)

[Book Depository](#)

[Barnes and Noble](#)

[Waterstones](#)

[Booktopia.](#)

[Wordery](#)

[Better World Books](#)

[Chapters Indigo](#)

I would love to hear from you! If you would like to contact me, links are below:

[Website](#)

[Facebook](#)

[Instagram](#)

[Twitter](#)

[Ellen Read Author blog](#)

[Goodreads](#)

[Pinterest](#)

About the Author

Ellen Read is the author of *The Dragon Sleeps* - an historical murder mystery romance novel, and *Love The Gift* - an eBook Novella, a time slip romance, a story to heal grief.

Ellen was born in Queensland, Australia.

She loves to read, fiction, non-fiction, poetry. She particularly loves history and stories of ancient myths and legends. Authors such as Edgar Allan Poe, Agatha Christie, and Victoria Holt, the latter of whom wrote gothic mystery/romances, have influenced her own work.

Other interests include photography, music and musical theatre, and dance. Ellen was a ballroom dancing teacher for many years and has also worked in Performing Arts administration.