

# The Children of Darking Hall ~ Part One

England – In the Year of our Lord, 1350

‘Please, Lord. Keep my children safe. Watch over them, protect them through this night.’ Outside, the wind raged, beating against the walls. The shutters closed across the bedchamber’s small window shuddered violently. Mary Windle crossed herself. She knew there was more than just wind and rain outside in the darkness.

Quietly, Mary struggled up from off her knees, and with a last anxious glance over her sleeping children, she collected the stuttering lantern from a bedside table and walked from the room.

The solitary bell stopped ringing, and within the humble church of St Cuthbert, there was silence. Mary Windle clasped her hands tightly together and squeezed shut her eyes. She prayed to God. She pleaded for the safe return of Peter and Emma, begging the Almighty for his help. Already a week had passed since her beloved children were taken, ghosted away from their beds during that cursed night, and a husband lost to their searching in the meantime.

Father Gilda spoke from the front of the church. ‘Oh, Lord, in this, our time of desperate need, shine a light to guide us through the darkness. Oh, Lord, we beseech you! Send us an Angel to drive the evil from our lands! Wickedness plagues us! Help us cleanse it from our homes!’

At that moment, the heavy church door swung open. Mary turned to see. A man came into St Cuthbert’s, and for a fleeting moment, light penetrated the dark clouds to kiss the newcomer with its glory. His hair gleamed gold; his face shone as fair as any maiden’s and his eyes sparkled a startling blue. Who was this stranger? He was a knight, that much was certain. Mail and plate peeked from beneath the man’s black robes, and a mighty sword hung at his side.

Mary returned her attention to Father Gilda, who raged with condemnation from the altar. He blamed Darking Hall’s plight on the French across the sea. Father Gilda liked to blame the French for every misfortune he or his country suffered, great or small. After all, God was an Englishman, and all those who opposed England were nothing but the spawn of Satan.

Father Gilda fumed uncontrollably for what felt like an age. Mary suspected he was putting on a special show for Lord Walter’s benefit. He and his entourage sat in the front row. Darking Hall was Lord Walter’s estate: a tower on the hill, surrounded by a sprawling village. Up until the coming of The Great Mortality – a remorseless and deadly plague – the estate thrived. But now, a few years since the evil pestilence swept the lands from south to north and east to west, half the population was in the ground. And now, a new horror haunted Darking Hall.

‘Thank you, Father Gilda,’ applauded Lord Walter, raising his hands in praise. ‘A service as good and wise as St Cuthbert’s has ever known.’

Father Gilda beamed, despite Lord Walter cutting short his ramblings. ‘I thank you, Lord. Kind words indeed.’

Lord Walter took Father Gilda's place at the front of the church. Lord Walter was a middle-aged man, and well-proportioned, but for a rounded paunch owed to a full plate and a full tankard. He was a well-liked lord; as well-liked as any lord can be - fair and true, and with a good soul. 'As you all well know, on the morrow is Christmas Day,' began Lord Walter. 'But,' his mood became sombre, 'to spend this special time without so many of our beloved children, is a heartbreak too far, especially when we have all endured enough heartbreak to last a hundred years!'

The church filled with mutterings of agreement. Darking Hall, like every other village across the country, was left ravaged by The Great Mortality.

'And so, my friends, today I ride out with my noble knights to put an end to this evil scourge upon our lands,' the church roared their encouragement, 'and bring back the children of Darking Hall!'

'We welcome your help, good sir knight, but know you what we intend this day?' Lord Walter had need of such willing allies to join his quest, but ever was he a fair man, and he would only accept this stranger's aid if the awful truth of their intent be known to him.

'Fear not, Lord Walter,' replied the stranger. 'I know your purpose, and my offer stands firm. I am well versed in confronting the foul things of this world.'

Lord Walter and his knights gathered inside the church to discuss their next actions. Mary Windle and many of the villagers stayed to offer their support.

'I tell you, boy,' said an old voice from the crowd, 'you may have confronted many a foul thing in your time, but none fouler than what I saw in them trees yonder.' The man, a wretched soul, pointed east - or at least where he thought east was - with a wrinkled and shaking hand. 'I saw creatures of the night, green-skinned and bowlegged, come from the wood. It was during the last full moon, the night as light as a dark day, so I saw them good. Evil looking things they were, bent and twisted, and up to mischief.'

'It is true,' added Sir Vilfort, Lord Walter's captain. 'We have sent men into the woods, but none have yet returned - only a single bloodied steed.'

'What else have you seen, good folk of Darking?' asked the stranger.

'Such awful things, good sir. The children are taken from their very beds in the dead of night, but never a sound is made of their passing. No scream or cry of alarm - ghosted away, they are. But folk have seen, good sir, seen things out in the dark. Things born of the Devil!'

'I thank you for your honesty and your warning,' answered the stranger, 'but I remain steadfast.' He addressed Lord Walter directly. 'My sword is your sword, Lord Walter.'

Mary was cheered by the stranger's pledge; she didn't know why, but he installed a burning hope within her soul. 'Are you a crusader, sir? Like the noble knights of old?' She had spied a white cross emblazoned upon the chest of his tunic beneath his robes.

The stranger smiled. 'My name is Wilfred,' he said, 'and yes, I am a crusader, of sorts.'

'I pray you return safely, and with my children,' said Mary, 'with all our children.'

Lord Walter led Wilfred and the men of Darking Hall from the village on horseback at noon. Father Gilda blessed their departure, throwing handfuls of horse dung for good fortune. Mary and the villagers praised their courage and prayed for their souls and the souls of their lost children. A grey, foreboding sky accompanied their ride, and with it, a persistent cold rain.

'Our strength is at a low, Sir Wilfred,' explained Lord Walter on the way. 'If it is not The Great Mortality stealing our men, it is King Edward - he fights the French, he fights the

Scottish, he fights the Welsh, he fights the Irish; if only he were here, he would fight the Devil, I am sure of it! But, alas, the burden is for us alone to bear.'

Before long, shrouded in the gloom, the leafless wood of their destination loomed. The trees appeared as dark shapes in the distance, their naked branches like the twisted limbs of giants.

'Stout hearts, men,' called Lord Walter from the saddle. He knew the stories; things other than green-skinned men haunted these woods. The villagers spoke of hearing wild cackling in the night, and the shrill voices of women caught on the wind. There were strange sightings too, of lights amidst the trees and of an ungodly wail made by a thing neither man nor beast.

The men rode their nervous mounts into the trees, persuading the skittish animals onwards with calls and clicks of encouragement. The ground beneath foot and hoof was soft and sodden, and the air cold and heavy with low cloud causing a thick misting precipitation. Lord Walter gripped tight the reigns of his steed with his gloved left hand and the pommel of his longsword even tighter with his right. The men of Darking Hall were living on their nerves, their helmeted heads turned left and right as they each tried to peer between the ever-thickening arrangement of tree trunks in their path.

'Lord, we must leave the mounts and continue on foot,' called Sir Vilfort.

'Agreed,' answered Lord Walter. 'What say you, Sir Wilfred?'

Wilfred slid open the visor of his helmet. 'Yes, Lord Walter. Let us take sword and shield and proceed as Sir Vilfort suggests, on foot.' He pulled his black horse to a stop and bent forward in the saddle. 'Fear not, Cedric, I will soon return,' he whispered soothingly into the animal's twitching ear. He was fond of Cedric.

The men tethered their horses and unstrapped weapons and shields before slowly and cautiously moving into the deepest darkest part of the wood. Beneath the trees, it felt as if night had already begun to fall; so tightly entwined were the gnarled, ever groping branches, they prevented what dim light there was from piercing their guard and ever reaching the leaf-strewn ground. It was disorientating to navigate among the numberless boughs, and for what felt like an eternity, they wandered without truly knowing their direction. But then, the men of Darking Hall smelt smoke on the moist air and through the trees they saw a distant glow.

'Let us approach with caution and with weapons drawn,' advised Lord Walter. He peered from the trees at the old lumber mill, and in particular, the adjoining cottage - the source of the light and smoke. The timber buildings stood bent and crooked within a small clearing, a clearing littered with wooden crosses sticking from the ground at varying angles. It was a grim setting for the grim weather. Abandoned soon after the plague struck, the lumber mill and its cottage now appeared reclaimed once more.

Wilfred pulled his sword free from its scabbard and followed Lord Walter and the knights of Darking Hall from the trees. They fanned out across the glade, stepping between the graves with their sad crosses of remembrance, toward the cottage. As they neared, the door to the dwelling opened to reveal a figure standing in the doorway.

'Eleanor? *Is it you?*' said Lord Walter, shock and confusion racing through his mind.

Wilfred looked to Sir Vilfort for an explanation.

'Lady Eleanor is Lord Walter's wife,' answered Sir Vilfort, appearing no less distressed than his Lord. 'I speak false, Sir Wilfred,' he conceded, grimly. 'The Lady Eleanor *was* Lord Walter's wife!' He barely spoke above a whisper. 'She has been gone these past two years,

succumbing to The Great Mortality along with Lord Walter's daughter, Agnes – yet here they both stand, risen from their graves! What cruel sorcery is this!

Indeed, a second woman now stood with the first, and Lord Walter was going to them with all haste.

'No, Lord Walter!' cried Wilfred in warning. 'They are not your wife and daughter!'

Lord Walter checked his advance. *Yes, the good knight speaks true. How can my loved ones be here?* Had he not watched his faithful Eleanor, and then his darling Agnes fade away before his very eyes? Had he not watched their caskets lowered into the earth with tears in his eyes?

'Husband, come to us!' called the Lady Eleanor, beckoning Lord Walter to her.

'Yes, Father, come to us!'

Lord Walter was torn between believing the truth before his eyes and the truth of the memories inside his mind. Here stood his family, as plain as day, yet he remembered they no longer lived. Lord Walter raised his sword. 'What *are* you?'

The women laughed. It was a torrent of terrible laughter, grotesque and mocking, but soon the laughter transformed into shrieking anguish. Mother and daughter wailed in misery, their body's withering and putrefying in moments. Their flesh rotted. Maggots oozed from their repulsive, rancid skin. Hair fell out in great clumps; teeth blackened, eyes bulged, bowels loosened - and forthwith a bout of flatulence, both foul and cruel, ripped through the dank clearing like nothing the good knights of Darking Hall had witnessed before.

An unholy stench laid the knights low, and as they retched their guts up through their throats, gagging and spitting on their bitter bile, the doors of the old lumber mill exploded outwards, and bursting through the splintered timbers came a monstrous thing of nightmare.

And then, Lady Eleanor's head fell off...

Part Two ~ Coming Soon!