

The Children of Darking Hall ~ Part Two

At ten feet tall, with blistered red skin, claws like scimitars and with a face so hideous not even its own mother could love, if indeed it had a mother, the beast bounded toward Lord Walter's men on powerful legs of muscle and sinew.

Sir Roger of the Heath, freshly returned to Darking Hall from his exploits in France fighting for good King Edward, now stared in mortification at the thing racing to face him. He had not seen the like of this dreadful foe before; not across the sea while in France, not in all the green and pleasant pastures of England, not in the hidden valleys and rugged mountains of Wales — yet perhaps this diabolical madman was a Scotsman come south to plunder and pillage? Granted, a Scotsman terribly disfigured, but Sir Roger had heard tell that those north of the wall were less than flattering to look upon and their ravenous desire to consume human flesh was legend. Was this William Wallace's descendant come to avenge himself upon the folk of Darking Hall while good King Edward was away?

The beast roared as it drew near. Sir Roger noted its ungodly features: slavering maw, uncommonly large teeth and red eyes like the Devil's own. This was no Scotsman or any other man; this was a demon from the fiery depths of the Underworld. Sir Roger raised his blade, braced his shield and prayed to God.

Wilfred watched as the pit-dweller disarmed Sir Roger — literally. The knight's sword arm, including sword, was torn from his body at the elbow by a deadly swipe of the foul beast's razor-sharp claws. Sir Roger appeared not to notice the sudden loss of his favoured limb. It was only when his own bright-red blood began pumping intermittently from the stump, squirting like fresh milk squeezed from plump udders, did he understand... and by then it was too late.

'Withdraw, Sir Roger!' bellowed Lord Walter, but by the time Lord Walter's words fell quiet, Sir Roger's head had joined Lady Eleanor's upon the sodden ground. 'Forward as one!' ordered Lord Walter. He'd seen enough to realise this monster was more than a match for any of them. Their only hope of salvation was for a coordinated assault from all sides.

'You heard Lord Walter,' cried Sir Vilfort, seeing the men falter, fear seizing their valiant hearts. 'We attack as one!'

With the pommel of his sword, Wilfred knocked the visor of his helmet shut and followed Sir Vilfort toward the beast. Lord Walter joined Sir John, and Sir Godfrey the Old, who's sword arm trembled and quivered nearly as much as Sir John's bottom lip. From the opposite side of the hollow approached Sir Robin, Sir Gaston and Sir Richard. Finally, Sir Otto and Sir Edgar closed the circle.

Wilfred caught Sir Vilfort. 'Allow me the honour, brave Sir Vilfort,' he said, and not waiting for the captain's reply, Wilfred strode to confront the fell creature.

The terrible monster — for monster it was — roared its acceptance to the black knight's challenge. And in the diminishing light, with the rain strengthening to hammer vertically into the exposed glade, battle was met. The pit-dweller, with the tumbling rain sizzling and steaming against its tortured red skin and with claws slick with Sir Roger's fresh blood, leapt to meet its next victim.

Yet Wilfred was no knight, not to Lord Walter, not to King Edward, not to anyone. Nor was he a man of England — in truth, he was no *man* at all... and he was no victim.

Wilfred's longsword burst into light, the blade shimmered and crackled as if Heaven itself charged the weapon with divine power. So, too, Wilfred's shield, that gleamed with the purest of light. Wilfred stood amidst the gloom pulsing like a star.

The snarling Hell-beast descended from above, crashing through the rain, intent on delivering the shining knight a heavy blow to the skull.

Wilfred, sinking to his knees to absorb the impact, thrust his shield high to block. And as the creature came down, its long sharp claws raking the shield's surface and pushing the black knight's feet deep into the soft soil under its considerable weight, Wilfred sent forth a shaft of light lancing from the tip of his sword. The holy blast punched the grotesque pit-dweller back through the moist air to thump hard onto its back some twenty feet south.

'Lord, have mercy upon my soul!' cried Lord Walter. 'What are you, sir?'

Wilfred stood. 'I am an Angel,' he said, 'and I send demons to Hell.'

The beast regained its taloned feet, and with eyes as pitch as the moonless night, it peered at the black knight, who even now was striding to re-engage. This was no feeble human. Strangely, the knight invoked a sensation deep from within the creature's black soul, and at first, it failed to recognise the feeling, so unaccustomed to experiencing it — if it ever had? But as the glowing knight neared, the demon began to understand what gnawed inside its gut, what crept cold and slithering up its twisted spine, what transformed its muscles into water... it was fear. From the deep confines of its fetid brain, it couldn't fathom why its prey should cause such a reaction, not when it feared nothing. Why was the prey fighting back? The beast roared in defiance, forcing itself to break free from the debilitating emotion gripping its evil heart. It charged to confront the source of its fear — and to kill it.

Lord Walter stood transfixed by the sight of the mighty duel unfolding before his eyes. The fiery-skinned demon attacked with deadly speed, lunging and slashing with its lethal claws. Yet Sir Wilfred was equal to every attempt at his life. His shield and sword blocked and parried in an electrifying blur. It was like nothing Lord Walter had seen before. He was under no illusions; this fight was beyond his skills and strength and those of his knights. And so, he turned his attention back toward the lumber mill's cottage, and although he felt an obligation to help Sir Wilfred as best he could, he ordered his men to advance onto the cottage and its open door. Finding the lost children of Darking Hall was his primary concern.

A welcoming light spilt from inside the building, attracting Lord Walter and his knights like moths to a lantern. A haven from the foul beast behind them, and the foul weather falling above them. Lord Walter stepped carefully around the putrified soup that had once taken the forms of his loved ones, but now resembled nothing more than repugnant puddles upon the ground that mingled with the rainwater. Sir Vilfort, ever his lord's captain, pushed forward, making sure he was first to venture across the threshold and not his lord. Inside, Sir Vilfort was presented with nothing more than what he might expect to find inside a homely rural cottage: a warm fire, a well-worn wooden table and chairs, knives and cooking utensils, herbs and game hanging from the rafters... but not Lady Margery, Lord Walter's own sister and governess of Darking Hall's academy of learning, and not the small black cat curled up on her lap, and undoubtedly not the strange green man standing at her side.

Lord Walter, next inside the cottage, stopped beside his captain, fresh horror coursing through his body. Was this his sister or another abomination? And was that really Mittens contently nestled between her thighs?

Lady Margery moved back and forth on a rocking chair, the old wood creaking rhythmically. She sat gazing through a small window in the far corner of the chamber, nonchalantly stroking Mittens. The green man leered at Lord Walter and his knights, its red pig-like eyes starring, repulsive face twitching.

'Greetings, Brother,' said Lady Margery. She didn't look up; her eyes remained fixed upon what was taking place outside. 'Your Angel fights well,' she said. Flashes of blinding light flared spasmodically in through the window, appearing more vivid now that darkness had descended. The battle outside in the glade seemed to be intensifying.

'Why Sister? What have you done?' implored Lord Walter.

'When my Lord Satan called upon me, I could not refuse him.' At last, she lifted her eyes from the window and looked at her brother. 'His rewards are plentiful.' She smiled. 'The children are but a small sacrifice in exchange for such power. Soon I'll drain them all, and then wield a force beyond imagining!'

Lord Walter was sickened. He pointed his longsword at the disgusting green skinned half-man, or whatever it was, poised at her side. 'And, pray tell,' he demanded, 'what is this sinister wretch?'

The creature growled.

'He is a minion sent by my Lord, sent to aid my mission —' Abruptly, Lady Margery returned her gaze to the window, and she screamed.

With all haste, Lord Walter and his men withdrew from the cottage. And at once, Lord Walter understood his sister's grief. He saw Sir Wilfred's mighty blade, searing white with heat and gleaming like the sun, pierced clean through his enemy's chest. The demon howled to the cloaked moon above, its limbs thrashing wildly in its death throes, encompassed in a shining light so bright Lord Walter and the knights of Darking Hall were compelled to lower their eyes for fear of going blind. For an instant, the whole glade was lit up in perfect clarity. The Angel, and there could be no doubting his divine heritage such was the knight's valour, held his sword two-handed, firmly skewered through the beast's writhing torso.

Lord Walter admired Sir Wilfred's courage. Wildred's shield was lost, smashed in two. His helm destroyed, torn from his head and ripped asunder. His plate armour dented, scoured and close to ruin. His long golden curls were soaked by sweat and rainwater and plastered across his battered face. It was plain for Lord Walter to see, the Angel's victory had been hard fought and hard earned.

And now, with a final act, Wilfred used his prodigious strength to wrench his blade free from the monster's body. The howling stopped, and the Hell-beast slowly toppled backwards, falling into the waterlogged dirt... and there it crumpled to dust.

The light pulsing from Wilfred's sword gradually faded, until finally, it winked out altogether, leaving the glade in darkness, and after holy light, a light as bright as any other in this world, the darkness that followed was absolute. But as eyes adjusted, Wilfred and the men of Darking Hall became aware of another light — the warm light of fire, casting its flickering orange glow through the open door of the cottage. Silhouetted under the door's archway stood Lady Margery, cat lovingly cradled in the crook of her left arm like a newborn babe, and in her right hand, she held a curious staff with a glittering red crystal secured at its tip. 'Do you know how many lives it cost to summon him?!' she shrieked.

Mitten's ears pricked in alarm. 'No matter.' She calmed herself, and her cat. 'Now, because of what you've done, more children will need to die.' Lady Margery smiled as Lord Walter's men began to edge toward her, swords raised. 'But first,' she said, 'you *all* need to die.' She looked to Lord Walter. 'I am dearly sorry, Brother.'

'Where are the children, Margery?' shouted Lord Walter. 'Tell us and your death will be swift, I promise it. If you do not, it is the fire for you.'

Lady Margery cackled wildly. 'Did you hear, Mittens?' she said, whispering to her cat. 'It is the fire for us! What do you think about that?'

The black cat turned its head and fixed its red eyes onto Lord Walter's. 'Lord Walter must die!' hissed Mittens, hackles raised.

Lord Walter and his men crossed themselves. 'May the Lord give us strength!' Lady Margery was beyond salvation, as was her familiar.

'Lord Walter,' called Wilfred, beckoning the lord to his side. 'If the children are alive, my guess is we will find them secured within the lumber mill. Take your men; I will deal with the witch.'

Lord Walter shook his helmeted head. 'No, sir,' he said. 'She is my responsibility.' Lord Walter gestured to his knights. 'Sir Gaston and Sir Richard will aid you in your search. Find our children.' Lord Walter clasped Wilfred's forearm in the warriors' way. 'Thank you, good sir knight,' he said, 'and God bless you.' With that, he turned to his sister.

At once, Wilfred ran into the rain-swept night toward the mill, Sir Gaston and Sir Richard on his heels. At the broken gates, Wilfred and the two knights halted. The Angel charged his sword once more with light, and there, within the dark of the mill, loitered what seemed a small army of green men, and as one, they snarled and sprung forward to attack.

Meanwhile, Lord Walter and his remaining knights advanced on the still cackling Lady Margery, who steadfastly held her position at the entrance to the cottage. 'Sister, I offer you one last chance. Surrender yourself and renounce the Devil!'

Lady Margery hawked and spat into her brother's open visor. 'Never!' she screamed and flung Mittens at his face.

Using the flat of his sword, Lord Walter skillfully batted the flying feline aside, but he only succeeded in diverting its flight on to Sir John. The cat dug into the knight's upraised shield with its sharp claws. Sir John, not knowing what to do, scurried backwards until he fell in panic. The demonic cat scabbled up the length of his shield, intent on finding a gap in the knight's armour and then to savage his exposed throat.

'Hold still, Sir John,' instructed Sir Godfrey the Old, trying to steady his shaking hands. Finally, the aged knight slashed down with his sword and sliced Mittens neatly in two against Sir John's shield.

'Well done, Sir Godfrey,' thanked a relieved Sir John, 'I did not doubt you for a moment,' he lied, gingerly scrapping the two halves of dead cat from his bloodied shield.

Lady Margery sobbed inconsolably.

Lord Walter stepped closer. 'Your demon is destroyed, your familiar is dead, and now it is your turn to be dispatched into Hell!'

Wilfred whirled and spun, a dance of death, his gleaming blade a swirling blur amidst the dark. Goblins fell before him like plague victims at an anti-rat rally. Sir Gaston and Sir

Richard fought bravely at his side, and it wasn't long until they pushed the green-skins back inside the lumber mill.

A dirty axehead buried itself into Sir Gaston's shield. The burly knight thrashed his sword into its owner's foul neck and moved onto the next.

Sir Richard vanquished a large specimen with a sweeping cut to its fleshy abdomen. He, too, stepped forward to target another opponent quickly.

Wilfred was unstoppable. The Angel cleaved a path deep inside the mill. And Sir Gaston and Sir Richard followed in his wake. No creature was spared — no creature from Hell, anyway. After the din of battle had subsided, the goblins eradicated, a new noise greeted their ears, a noise to gladden their hearts.

Wilfred, Sir Gaston and Sir Richard led the scared children out into the wet night, and to safety. Sir Gaston and Sir Richard ran in all haste to the cottage. 'What new evil is this?' demanded Sir Gaston.

The witch enthralled Lord Walter and his men with an evil spell. They were slumped on their knees with a wavering otherworldly light drifting from their bodies to float toward Lady Margery's red crystal tipped staff.

'Go no further!' warned Wilfred. 'She has bewitched them with dark magic!'

Lord Walter and his men swayed back and forth, moaning in despair, their very essence draining to recharge the red crystal atop Lady Margery's staff.

Wilfred moved quickly. There wasn't much time. He knew a bloodstone of the size the witch possessed was capable of leaching the life force from them all in mere moments. Wilfred couldn't risk a blast of Angel light, not with Lord Walter and his men so close. Instead, he pulled back his right arm, and with all his angelic strength, he hurled his mighty blade. The longsword arced through the darkness, twirling end over end, cutting through the sheeting rain toward its target.

Lady Margery, seeing the glinting sword spinning ever closer, released her hold on the knights knelt before her, and at once, utilising the fresh power at her disposal, sent forth a torrent of crimson flame. Instantly, Wilfred's sword was propelled from whence it came, and at such speed, the Angel could do nothing other than watch in horror as the weapon, now glowing as red as the bloodstone, lanced agonisingly through the flesh and bone of his left shoulder. The Angel staggered backwards, pain flaring. Try as he might, Wilfred could not dislodge the blade — it throbbed with unholy power, corrupting from within. Weakened, Wilfred fell to his knees. If the cursed blade was not soon removed, he knew he would fade and die; such was the evil seeping into his body. Then, a second jet of red light struck him, and in that awful moment Wilfred realised, injured as he was, that he was defenceless to prevent the witch from stealing his own life force. The red beam, streaking from the Lady Margery's staff, dragged the kneeling Angel through the mud until she had him, forlorn and defeated, at her feet.

Lady Margery could feel the Angel's life flow into the red crystal, the bloodstone. She sensed the magnificent energy wash over her. Such power! She could summon, not one, but a hundred demons with this! Nothing could stop her now. She would rule the Kingdom!

And then the red light blinked out and she howled in agony.

Lady Margery looked down to see a sword sticking into her belly, and put there by none other than Lord Walter, her brother. Realisation drained the colour from her face, a realisation that she had lost, and that she was going to Hell...

'Goodbye, Sister.' Savagely, Lord Walter twisted the blade inside her guts, and she screamed one last time before slumping into his arms, a last embrace, pushing her brother's blade clean through her torso and out the other side. The staff, with its dreadful crystal, fell to the ground, lost beneath muddied puddles, hidden from sight and mind.

The next morning, on Christmas day, with sunlight at their backs and good cheer in their hearts, Lord Walter and his knights led the children of Darking Hall home. Father Gilda proclaimed it a day of miracles! And there was much rejoicing.

'But, Lord,' said Mary Windle, holding close her beloved children, Peter and Emma, 'where is the crusader? Where is Sir Wilfred?'

The black knight, pained by his injury, hunched low in the saddle. 'So, Cedric, my friend,' he said. 'Let us see where the light takes us.' He patted his steed's flank with affection and encouraged the animal from under the dark embrace of the trees and out into the wondrous glare of the rising sun.

The man, dirty and ragged, dug feverishly in the mud, like a rabid hound with the scent of blood in its nostrils. He knew it was here, somewhere, he could feel it calling to him. At last, his groping hands found something deep within the filth, something hard. Frantically, the man pulled it free. A blood-red stone. He had found it! Beside himself with glee, and hugging the precious treasure to his heart, Billy Windle ran into the woods to find his master.