

The Fluttering Thing



A line of men trailed wearily across the plain. They made slow progress, shuffling along, one behind the other. Red beams from the setting sun cast their shadows sideways off the embanked track and across the quaking bog which lay on either side of it.

The men did not speak to each other; they stumbled along in silence. Each of them was thinking about food. One dreamed of lamb stew, another of a cheeseburger, another of crab salad. They knew they would get none of these things when they reached the end of their march. The evening meal would be grey gruel, as it had been at breakfast.

Their minds on food, the marching men kept their eyes on their feet. They did not look ahead or sideways. They had come this way so often that there was nothing new to fix their attention. Beyond the bog, and all around them, lay a ring of smouldering volcanoes. Each one belched out pink or grey smoke. Now and then they spat up a fan of sparks. From time to time a trickle of molten lava slid down the side of one of the mountains. The marching men ignored these occurrences, which were nothing new.

Now and then a man would fall to the ground, unable to walk any farther. He would be ignored by his companions. Perhaps, after a few minutes' rest, he might struggle to his feet and recommence walking. Perhaps not.

At the rear of the column were guards with machine pistols. These were seldom used. If the fallen man appeared to be dead, there was no need to shoot him. His body would be tossed into the bog, where it instantly sank from view. If he proved to be alive, and able to go on, he would be prodded to his feet.

If alive, but too weak to walk, he went into the bog.

A man called Mark was talking to himself as he plodded along. He was in the middle of the column, with half his companions ahead, half behind him.

He was not talking aloud, but inside his mind.

"Moist sugar, raisins, currants, candied peel, flour, salt, nutmeg, cinnamon, eggs, milk, grated lemon peel, brandy. Some say grated carrot. Some say mashed potato. I say no. Some say mace. Boil for six hours, or steam for at least seven. Serve with a suitable sauce, perhaps brandy butter. Did I say flour? Did I say salt? Heat a tablespoonful of brandy in a spoon over a candle, set light to it, and pour over the pudding before serving. Mashed potato! What a revolting suggestion!"

At this moment the man called Mark saw something unusual just ahead.

A live creature was floundering in the bog on the left-hand side of the causeway. Something was in difficulties there. Due to the coating of black mud it was impossible to decide whether it was human or animal. Neither would last long before sinking out of sight.

Most of the trudging men had passed by without taking the slightest interest in what was taking place by the side of the road. If they thought about it at all they assumed that it was one of their companions who wished to put an end to his dismal existence.

But Mark, for some reason, decided differently. He strode out of the moving column, knelt down, extended a hand, grabbed the nearest part of the creature that he could reach, and pulled hard.

The rest of the marching men paid no heed to this attempt at rescue. They plodded on their way.

Mark pulled again—tugged—twisted.

With a loud, sucking gulp, the bog released its victim. The black, slimy body suddenly exploded out of its gluey socket and landed on the bank, knocking Mark off his feet.

"I thank you!—I thank you!" gasped the stranger as Mark scrambled up and was about to resume his plodding march. "Wait! Don't go! I am able to reward you! I have a—I have a—a thing."

"Errrch. A—a thing?" Mark was so much out of the habit of talking that his words came out in a thick croak. "A thing?" he said again.

"A magic thing. A wish thing."

The muddy stranger pulled a kerchief from his pocket and, crouching at the roadside, carefully wiped an object that he had been clutching in his right hand. It was about the size of a hen's egg.

"Found it—on the volcano—Mount Tlectac—" gasped the rescued man. "My great-grandmother—told me—about them—"
"Which volcano?"

"Tlectac. On the first day of autumn—or the last day of spring—the fire mountain throws up these pods—"

"Pods? Looks like a stone to me."

"No. There is something inside. Something alive."

"Alive?"

"Yes. But you must never let it out. Or the power is lost."

"Power?"

"Power to grant a wish. One wish every twenty-four hours. Anything you want. A wish to each person who holds it—I was just going to wish," the muddy man said, "when the mountain heaved up its crust and threw me into the bog. If it weren't for you, I would have sunk. So now I am going to wish my wish, and then I will give you the pod—don't open it, whatever you do, or the power will be dispersed—"

The muddy man stretched out his muddy hand and laid the curiously heavy oval object in Mark's palm.

"Saints! I can feel something fluttering inside—like a chick inside an egg—horrible!"

"Yes, but *whatever* you do, don't let it out—or no more wishes."

The stranger drew a deep, croaking breath. Then he laid a finger on the object in Mark's palm. He said, "I want to go *there!*" and immediately vanished. But the heavy, egg-shaped stone remained in Mark's hand. The fluttering inside it was now frantic. It tickled, it shivered, it struggled.

"Poor devil in there," thought Mark. "What can it be? What it must be like, trapped, shut up inside that hard, heavy case—"

He studied the solid, egg-shaped object.

It was greenish grey in colour, slightly shiny where the stranger had rubbed it with his handkerchief. A thin white line ran round its widest circumference. "Can that be a crack?" wondered Mark. "Like the opening of a box. I wonder if it unscrews . . . ?"

"Come on you—number ninety-four!" called one of the armed guards. "Get going!"

He prodded Mark with his pistol. Mark took a couple of steps forward.

He said, "I want a Christmas pudding!"—and then sharply unscrewed the object with a twist of both hands. The two halves separated smoothly. There was nothing inside, apart from a drop or two of greenish fluid.

Mark heard—but did not see—something that whisked up into the air above his head and immediately fluttered away over the bog towards the distant mountains.

Mark threw away the two halves of the pod and stooped to pick up a Christmas pudding which lay in a dish at his feet on the muddy ground. Somebody had just poured flaming brandy over it.

"Hand that over!" said the guard.