

On The Blasted Heath

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The two men in faded homespun plaid sat on a broken wall which lay somewhere in the middle of an unidentified and nameless heath. The wall encircled a tall monolith of dark stone. There was a thin mist; you could see for about a hundred yards, maybe a little more. The air was still.

The haunting cry of curlews was the only sound.

The two men lifted their heads.

'Listen,' said one.

'Hoof-beats,' said the other. He listened. 'Three of them: three riders at a canter. Skilled. Light in the saddle. Bloodstock steeds; rare bloodstock. Bred for speed. High in mettle.'

The men stood, ready to fight, their plaids off their upper-arms, claymores in their hands.

Subtle, shapeless, eldritch forms mysteriously appeared: the air was perturbed: then out of the mists they cantered — three elegant women riding side-saddle, dressed in formal black equestrienne. One raised her hand and reined in her mount; the others followed suit. Their horses' breath smoked in the cold air. The three women were imperious in their top hats and veils, their black, tightly tailored habits and their riding-skirts, their highly polished boots and their black gloves. Each held a riding cane.

The first woman, who rode a bay, spoke: 'Hello, Macbeth, Thane of Glamis.'

The second one, who rode a grey, spoke: 'Hello, Macbeth, Thane of Cawdor.'

The third one, who rode a red roan, spoke: 'Hello, Macbeth: one of these days you'll be king.' She smiled.

Their accents were perfect finishing school English. You would not have guessed that you were on a desolate heath in coastal Moray; these riders put you in mind rather of the Chilterns.

Macbeth started. 'But—' He indicated Banquo.

The riders turned to Banquo.

'Hello,' said the rider aside the bay.

'Hello,' said the rider aside the grey.

'Hello,' said the rider aside the red roan.

Banquo, unable to outstare the riders, bowed his head.

The first rider looked at her watch. 'The charm's wound up. Let's go.' Her voice was decided.

The riders set off.

'Stay, you imperfect speakers,' called Macbeth after them.

The first rider, pausing, looked back. 'You call Received Pronounced imperfect?' She began to laugh. Her two sisters began to laugh also. 'Understand us in the Future Perfect, dear boy! One day you must. As the Future Perfect becomes the Present. As it shall.' Her voice was one of amusement. 'And in that Present you'll understand how Futures were, and are, and shall be determined in the dispensation of their hour. And thus you'll understand the Past. This Past. This present Past. Which one day will be Perfect. Finished. And finished with.' She clicked her fingers. 'Gone. But the totality of Time is not within your understanding, and never shall be. History is the improbable invention of the credulous. This is always so. As I say, the charm's wound up. Can you not hear its ticking?'

Then, laughing as one, the three women tapped their mounts' flanks with cane and heel and, followed by the shadows of their eldritch portents, they vanished into the mists.

The curlews hidden in the mist began their cries anew. Apart from the curlews the only sound was the eerily crystalline double-tick of the unseen charm.

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