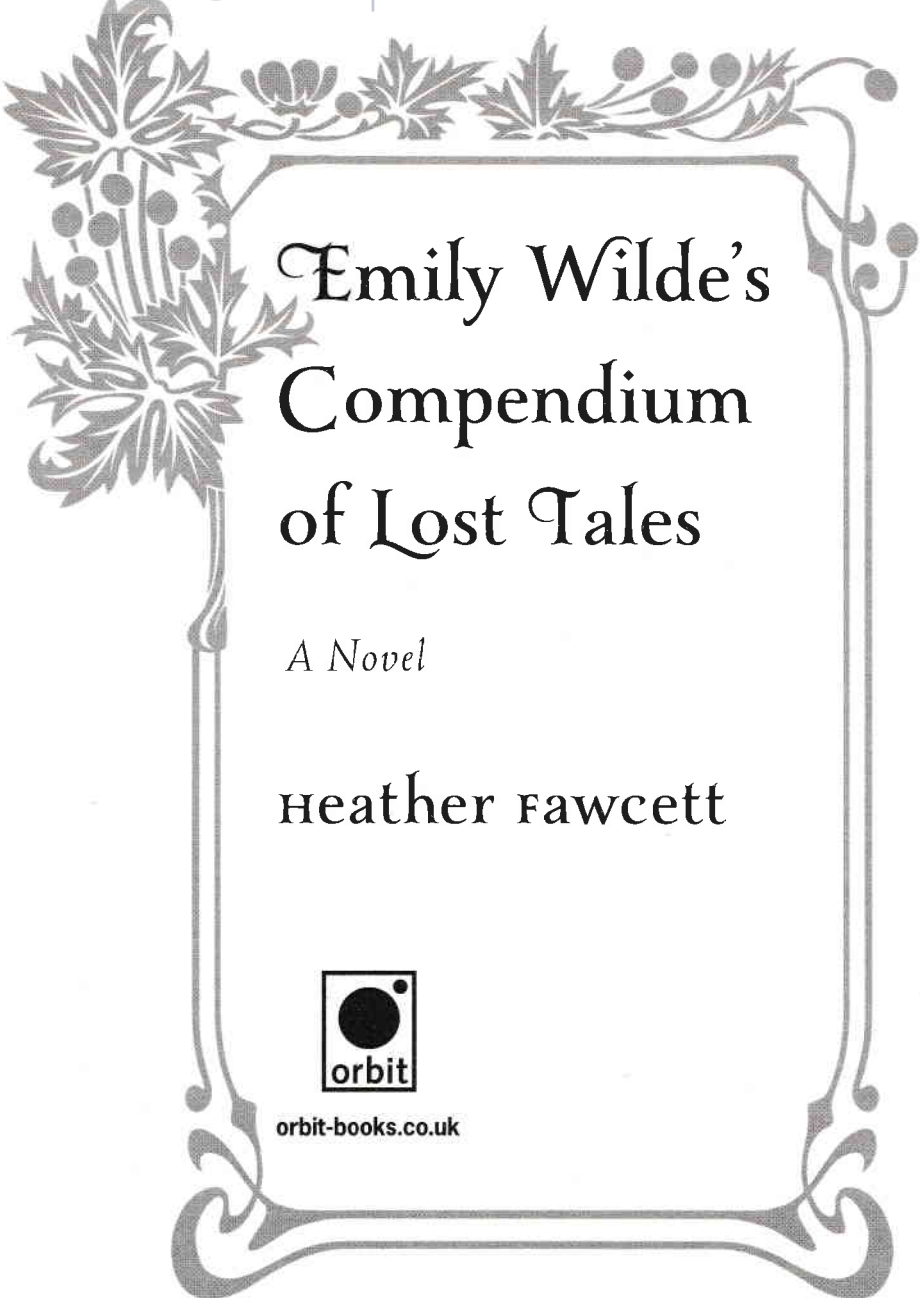


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29th December 1910—cont'd

If there is one subject upon which Wendell and I will never agree, it is the wisdom of attempting to drag a cat into Faerie. Even if said animal is a *faerie cat*; even if we are merely returning her to the world whence she came, still it is the most frustrating process. Wendell and I had lost Orga twice already while navigating the rocky Greek coastline, as she went charging off after mice or gulls, and now, as we stood at long last at the threshold of Wendell's door, she had vanished again.

"Bloody thing needs to be leashed," I said, out of spite more than anything. I strongly suspected that if I approached Orga with anything resembling a harness, it would end with me wearing the cat on my head, likely with unfavourable results where my facial features were concerned.

Shadow was at my side, as usual, his snout buried in the fragrant coastal grasses, snuffing busily. He would never abandon me as Orga is so often abandoning Wendell. Dogs are proper companions, not the physical manifestation of caprice.

Wendell made no reply. He had gone still upon first sight of the door, so much so that he might have been some gilded illustration in a storybook, except that his cloak billowed at

the hem, stirred by the salt breeze, which also tugged at the golden hair falling into his eyes.

I touched his arm, and he came back to himself, turning to smile at me.

“Em,” he said, “she is a *cat*. You might as well expect Shadow to disregard your will as assume Orga to be governed by it. Remember her nature.”

“Her malicious, untrustworthy nature,” I said. Naturally the cat reappeared a heartbeat later, as if to spite us both, golden eyes glittering against her black fur, which rippled strangely, like smoke trapped within cat-shaped glass. Shadow, seated by my feet, gave her a weary sort of look and made his usual overture of friendship, nudging Orga gently with his nose. She arched her back and hissed.

“You should give up, dear,” I told him, but the poor dog only looked at me blankly. Shadow’s world was one in which all and sundry either fawned over him or kept a respectful distance from his intimidating bulk. Each time Orga hissed at him, Shadow seemed to assume it a misunderstanding, which grew increasingly improbable as these incidents accumulated, but still less improbable, in his view, than being disliked.

Wendell had gone back to staring at the door—savouring the moment, I suppose. I wondered if he would give a speech or something—after all, he’d spent more than a decade searching for the thing, and now here it was, folded snugly against the hillside like the bow on a Christmas gift.

I tapped my foot against a rock, feeling rather smug. Well, it had taken me only a handful of months to track the door down, hadn’t it? I’d learned Wendell was looking for a door to his realm in November of last year when we were in Ljosland, and I’d begun researching the question in earnest in March, not long after we returned to Cambridge. And now—after a few twists and turns in Austria—here we were.

I considered and discarded several quips to this effect before deciding it would not be very magnanimous of me, and merely noted, "It's a pair with the one in St. Liesl."

Indeed, the door before us was nearly identical in shape and style—it blended into the Greek countryside perfectly, its wooden boards painted with a scene of pale, pebbly stone and sun-dried vegetation. A little patch of rock roses to the left continued into the painting, and these two-dimensional blooms tossed their heads in the breeze in time with their tangible brethren. Even more impossible, to my mortal eyes, was the doorknob, a square of glass enclosing a splash of turquoise sea. This nexus is truly the most peculiar variety of faerie door I have encountered in my career.*

Though I'd expected to find it here, one can never be certain of faerie doors, and there was relief mixed into my self-satisfaction.

I turned to scan the landscape, shading my eyes against the sun. It was my preference *not* to suddenly vanish from sight in view of observers, simply because it was easier that way—Wendell and I did not need any well-intentioned search parties following us into Faerie. Beyond a little salt-stained grove of cypress trees, the land stretched out in a series of pale commas that embraced a sea so blue it made my eyes water. A pair of two-legged specks moved across a bend of sand in the distance—that was all. The countryside was empty but for us and the wind.

"How will *they* follow us?" I said, trying to hide my trepidation.

* Unfortunately, my paper on the subject—currently under consideration by the *British Journal of Dryadology*—is still held up in peer review. It seems many scholars are not yet willing to accept the existence of faerie doors that connect multiple places, and it is possible that I shall have to gather additional evidence to override the skeptics, or perhaps convince other scholars to venture to Austria themselves to test my findings.

“Oh—easily enough,” Wendell said absently. And he reached out with uncharacteristic hesitation and turned the knob.

We stepped through together, Wendell’s hand closing around mine. I did not need his help, as I’d ventured through a few such impossible doors in my day without faerie aid, but I knew this was not his reason. His hand trembled lightly. I laced our fingers together and tightened my grip.

The little cottage beyond the door was empty, thank God—the winter faerie who owned it was now roaming the countryside, revelling in the delights of his season, as Wendell said such Folk were wont to do. The floor had been swept and the dishes in the washbasin put away, and overall everything had a very tucked-in, tidy look about it, as one might leave a home before a prolonged absence. I kept my gaze away from the mantel and the faerie’s gruesome “art.”

Orga and Shadow had followed behind us, Shadow giving the door a curious sniff before entering, but otherwise showing no sign he viewed this as any different from stepping through the door of my office at Cambridge. Wendell allowed it to close behind us, and we gazed at the row of six doorknobs on the inner side.

I wanted to ask him about those doorknobs—specifically, I wanted to investigate them further, as two were a complete mystery to me and I wished to know where they led—but I knew it was not the time. His fingers drifted past the knob that would open the door to the Peloponnese again—which was now at the top—and past the one for the Austrian Alps. This one had a large key in it that looked to be made from bone. Locked.

Wendell clicked the lock open—I pictured the little door shimmering into existence once more against the Alpine mountainside—then removed the key and set it on the table.

He lingered briefly on the doorknob decorated with a floral pattern before returning to the one covered in moss, which was now in the middle, for some reason. It had been lowest in the row when Ariadne and I had passed through the winter faerie's house in October. Wendell pushed the door open.

Light.

It was full morning, and my vision flooded with colour. Primarily green, but there was also the yellow of moss and lichen on stone, the violet of bluebells clustered at the edge of the forest, the gold of sunbeams, and the rich azure of the sky. The door opened onto a hill in a small clearing, beyond which a wall of trees nodded their boughs in the wind, as if in greeting. The air was wet from a recent rain and heavy with the smell of green and growing things—all as I remembered.

Wendell pressed my hand to stop me from moving forward. His eyes followed Orga as she sniffed the air and then paced into the open. Her ears were pricked, alert, but the tension quickly left her body, and she sat back to nibble at a stalk of grass.

"I thought my stepmother might have this door watched," Wendell murmured. "If she lived."

"Or she might have sealed it," I agreed. "But then there is no reason to think she knew how Ariadne and I escaped, unless one of the common fae took note of our flight and told her."

Wendell nodded, but still he stood hesitating on the threshold. He looked pale and strangely young against the shadow of the winter faerie's home; he put me in mind of a nervous child hesitating behind a stage curtain, unwilling to emerge when his cue came.

I stepped into the sunlight, a welcome change from the dank chill of the winter faerie's house. A little shudder went through me, though whether it signified terror or excitement,

I could not tell. A part of me wonders if my fear of Wendell's kingdom, instilled by the many dark and unpleasant stories I have read of it throughout my career—not to mention my experiences here previously, which have faded into half-memories with the aura of nightmares—will ever fully leave me.

I gave his hand a playful tug. He looked at me, still pale, but something in my face seemed to steady him, and he allowed me to pull him through the door.

He took a few steps and then suddenly sank into a crouch, burying his face in his hand. Orga established herself at his feet, facing the forest warily. Shadow gave her what I can only describe as an approving look.

I strode up to the brow of the hill, both to give him a moment and to look for trouble. The hill was not high enough to afford a view over the entire forest, though I could make out the familiar glitter of a distant lake, over which rain fell in silver sheets. I leaned against one of the weathered standing stones that crowned the hill—as I did, there came a sort of startled skittering sound, and I caught a flash of a small foot disappearing under the stone, as if someone had been warming their toes in the sunlight.

Well, the common fae knew we were here. But that was unavoidable.

I made my way back down the hill. I expected to find Wendell enraptured by the bluebells and the forest—perhaps even the ghastly thing lurking at the shadowed edge of the clearing, one of the trees that gave *Where the Trees Have Eyes* its name. But no—he had brushed his tears away, and now had his chin propped on his hand, gazing at me with one of those enigmatic expressions I've not yet learned to parse, if I ever will. One of his faerie looks, as I think of them.

"What?" I said.

He rose, shaking the dew from his cloak. "You have that look."

He had mirrored my own train of thought, which made me scowl at him irrationally. "Which?"

"The one you wear whenever you outsmart me in some area," he said.

"Well," I began with a shrug, then stopped. My magnanimity was wearing thin, I'm afraid. "Haven't I?"

He laughed, a clear, bright sound, and then, before I knew what was happening, he had lifted me off my feet and spun me through the air, the greenery and shadow of the forest a whirl all around me.

"My beloved Emily," he murmured in my ear.

"Yes, yes, all right," I said, though I did not pull away. My smugness was back, together with a warm sort of satisfaction. It was pleasing to see him this happy.

The door swung open behind us, and suddenly the clearing was filled with noise. The guardians emerged first in a flurry of wingbeats, Razkarden in the lead. As they passed into the emerald light, they shed their glammers, transforming from pale owls to the most nightmarish creatures imaginable—still owls, at least in the main, but ragged and sinewy, eyes milky with cataracts. In place of feet, six massive spiderish limbs erupted from their torsos.

Razkarden alighted on Wendell's shoulder—or shoulders, for his legs would not fit on one—arranging his hideous limbs with surprising delicacy, and I was suddenly backing away from Wendell fast. Wendell, untroubled as usual, stroked Razkarden's beak and spoke quietly to the faerie monster. He took flight again, settling in the trees with the others.

Next came the trolls, by far the least unnerving of our motley army of common fae, their tools clanking in the packs

on their backs. They burst into pleased muttering upon first sight of Wendell's kingdom, one marching up to a stump to rap on it, as if testing its suitability for building materials. Others seemed to be exclaiming over a pile of stones.

The tree fauns did not linger long in the clearing, which was a relief, but slunk immediately into the forest shadows, their feral hounds close at their heels. Now, the world holds enough Folk hideous to the eye, but in this respect I can think of none who surpass these fauns, with their scabbed and twisted horns and bulbous features.

Last came the *fuchszwerge*, streaming through the door in an auburn river, fox tails thrashing with excitement. Several dozen appeared to have volunteered to accompany us; the exact number is difficult to ascertain given how rarely the beasts stay still.

"*Finally*," Snowbell crowed as he surged to the front of the pack. "Now the quest will begin! And it will be far more exciting than the last one, for there is only *one* mortal oaf this time." He settled himself at my feet in a proprietary sort of way and began to wash his face, pausing to snarl at any others who ventured near. Telling the fox-faeries apart remains difficult, but Snowbell is easy to identify, for he is always bragging about his role in my last adventure.

Wendell looked back at the trees, his reverence replaced with merriment.

"Shall we retake our kingdom, Em?" he said.

A shiver went through me at that. He had switched to Faie, which I had, of course, heard him speak before, but there was something discomfiting about the way he did it, abandoning the mortal tongue like an unsuitable cloak at the change of seasons. My hand strayed unconsciously to Shadow's head, and the dog butted at my palm, which steadied me.

“I suppose we might as well get on with it,” I replied in the same language.

We found the path Ariadne and I had taken back in October at the bottom of the hill. I’d half expected it to be gone—why shouldn’t faerie paths be as wayward as their doors?—but there it was, though it seemed to veer more to the north than I remembered.

I looked to the right, uncertain. “This way?”

Wendell followed my gaze. “I think not. The old ways will take too long. It’s quite a distance to the castle, and I’d rather not tarry.”

And he marched off into the dense tangle of undergrowth, making a sort of shooing gesture with his hand. Then—

A path unfurled at his feet, keeping pace several steps ahead of him, trees and grasses and stones simply drifting aside, as easy as waves retreating from a shore.

“Wendell,” I said faintly.

He had already been turning to check on me, striding back up the path he’d made. I watched to see if it would dissolve again behind him, but it didn’t, or at least not as quickly as it had appeared; the edges seemed to evaporate a little, greenery creeping back over the hard-packed earth.

He clasped my hands between his, his gaze radiating warmth and not a small amount of mischief. “We haven’t much time for sightseeing, it’s true—but let me show you what I can. Would you like that?”

He was teasing me, of course—he knew the answer as well as I did. The dangers looming before us, the trepidation I felt at my decision to venture here, to stay at his side—it was all abruptly subsumed by something much more familiar, which sent my heart skittering with excitement.

Scientific curiosity.

“Lead on, then,” I said, taking the arm he offered me.

The path expanded to comfortably accommodate us. Shadow kept pace beside me, while Orga slunk in and out of the forest, appearing sometimes before us and sometimes behind, occasionally with some small, wriggling creature clutched in her maw. The others followed like a long and hideous train. I did not see the guardians, but from Wendell’s unconcern, I assumed they were lurking in the canopy, watching us as they had during my first visit, though their intentions this time were less murderous—I hoped. Snowbell kept back, which he generally does when Wendell is near me. I believe he has the same terror of him that Poe does, though Snowbell expresses it in a rather more disturbing manner. I have heard him speculating more than once with his fellows about the quantity of blood Wendell would shed in retaking his kingdom, whether there would be leavings for the *fuchszwerge* to enjoy, and if so, what these might taste like.

Wendell talked as we went, pausing every few moments to point something out—he has a great deal of botanical knowledge when it comes to his realm, which I can only assume he was born with; I cannot imagine him acquiring it any other way. When I took out a notebook, he beamed at me—I had intended to spend our first day in Faerie observing rather than compiling facts, but he was so pleased whenever I lifted my pencil that I found myself recording a great deal. My concentration was somewhat hampered by the looming peril, but in no way did I need to feign enthusiasm, and I asked many questions, though his answers were not always helpful and tended towards the nonsensical. I will here record a select few insights.

On the geography of Where the Trees Have Eyes

This is composed primarily of a mixture of woodland and heath, with a scattering of boggy regions and a mountain range that bounds the realm to the east. These mountains are known as the Blue Hooks. There are three lakes: Muckle, the largest; Silverlily, beside which sits the castle; and Lower Lake in the south, a dark place within the lands claimed by the hag-headed deer, where we would not be venturing.

Asking Wendell to help me sketch a map of the realm proved largely fruitless, which did not surprise me. It is a widely acknowledged truth that Faerie has all the spatial integrity of a dream; a mountain may be in one place on a Tuesday and decide to spend Wednesday in a more favourable locale. At different points during our conversation, Wendell informed me: that the lakes and the mountain range were fixed points; that the Blue Hooks had once encircled the realm entirely, and were known to stretch themselves on occasion; and that Lower Lake had a contrary streak and sometimes switched places with Silverlily.

On the faerie snails

After my unpleasant run-in with these uncanny denizens during my previous visit—I can still feel their shells breaking beneath my hands and knees, and hear their tiny screams of agony—I desired to know more about them. Wendell, though, would only shudder and advise me against making enemies of them. Apparently, they possess a crude intelligence and value their dignity above all things; as such, they spend most

of their lives occupied with revenge quests. While their vengeance may be slow in coming, they always have it in the end.

On the bloody trees

I do not wish to write about these. But what sort of scholar of the Folk would I be if I hid from every horror?

No. I cannot do it.

But I must. Lord, what a mess of blotches and crossings-out this entry has become. Let us get this over with as quickly as possible.

The trees that give Wendell's realm its name are known as attentive oaks, a typical example of faerie euphemism. They are scattered here and there throughout the woodlands, though more often than not they lurk in the darker folds of the forest, the better to catch one by surprise and provide ample material for nightmares, I assume. Had each tree only a single pair of eyes, perhaps they would be bearable, but there are hundreds, if not thousands. For each leaf has an eye staring out of it, which may be creased in rage or widened in surprise, heavy-lidded or bloodshot, as if there is a unique personality trapped within every one, and all move to stare at you as you pass, rustling wetly.

Wendell, naturally, takes a philosophical view of these monstrosities. "Have you not seen worse in Faerie, Em?" he said. "Only leave them be, and you shall have nothing to fret about. Give them no reason to take offence."

"How does one avoid offending a tree?"

He began ticking things off on his fingers. "Don't insult them. Don't remove their leaves. Don't go tearing them open to see if there is a faerie king more agreeable to your tastes hiding inside."

I did not deign to reply to this. "That's all?"

He thought it over. "Mind your step in the autumn months."

God.



As we went on, I could not help noticing that the path Wendell made for us was a much cheerier one than Ariadne and I had followed; we traversed sunny glades and bluebell meadows, and sections of bilberry-studded moor open to the sky, often boasting impressive standing stones. Silver baubles sparkled in the treetops, about the size of globes and light as air, which sometimes drifted from one tree to another with the wind. Wendell informed me that these were, in fact, a kind of faerie stone, which contained enchantments meant to provide comfort to travellers. He warned me against breaking them, though, for some had been tampered with by bogles, and could no longer be trusted.

"Are you purposely keeping me from the darker parts of your realm?" I enquired, as the path brought us to an expansive view of Muckle Lake. "I have been here before, you know. I'm aware it is not all sun-splashed meadows and harmless archaeology, so you needn't act like a nervous suitor on his best behaviour."

He gave a surprised laugh, and I knew I had guessed close to the mark. "Can you blame me for wishing to impress you a little? Besides, the darker groves are home to some unpleasant bogles and beasts. I suspect they would bow to me, but I would rather not risk any unpleasantness. We will have plenty of that to go round once we reach the castle."

All the while, he used his magic carelessly in a way I have not seen from him before, like an aristocrat tossing coins from his carriage, pressing his hand to trees to quicken them