

The púca MacPhellimey was sitting in a hut in the middle of a firwood, in front of what looked like a brand-new two-leaved hinged writing-table, reading in the fading light from a thick tome as his long fingernails tapped against the wood. He was wearing trews, but was naked from the waist up. His head was that of a black, horned he-goat.

He looked up as they came in. Yellow eyes, with long oblong black pupils cutting across the iris. *Fuck me, the Devil*, Martín thought, staring at the shaggy black hanks of wool that fell down past the creature's bare shoulders, at the huge curving horns. His skin tingled as the glamour spread around them, a crinkling invisible veil.

'Be welcome to my house,' said the púca, in a deep man's voice that startled Martín even more than his appearance. He must have been expecting bleating. 'It is seldom I am honoured by callers in the evening early.' He set the book aside. 'I was pondering the nature of the numerals. Be pleased to come in.'

'We *are* in, MacPhellimey,' grumbled Domhnall. 'We are already in the middle of your hovel.'

The púca pointedly looked at Domhnall's and Martín's boots, to which they had attached the iron spurs Cairtriona had given them. Protection, Domhnall had explained. 'Like the gentleman I am, I tend to purposely refrain from exercising my powers of vision on my visitors. But if my eyes do not deceive me, you are wearing sharp things on you. That is rude. Almost as rude as Brian Boru who came to tame me in the fits of my passion with a bridle made of my own pilfered tail hairs.' He grinned goatishly, displaying large yellow teeth. 'Not that it worked for long.'

'If you are a gentleman, then you won't mind our wearing cold iron,' Domhnall replied. 'We don't want to be compelled to break our necks.'

'I would hazard the guess that you are still angry that you fell into a ditch in front of that comely lass, all those years ago, judge. It was, indeed, a most embarrassing predicament for a hopeful young man gone a-courting.'

Domhnall went so red in the face that Martín thought he might burst a vein. ‘The ditch you *threw* me into.’

‘Indeed I did not,’ replied the púca. ‘I cannot be blamed for the fact that you decided to plunge headlong into the mud, just as there was no way for me to know that the adjoining track was frequented by bovines. If you found yourself lying prone with your face in a cow turd and made a fool of yourself in front of your would-be paramour, it was through no fault of mine.’

*‘You were goring my buttocks.’*

‘Your statement is highly debatable. If your buttocks happened to find their way to the tips of my horns, knowing as you did and do that the lamming and leathering of such parties as are sent to me is my vocation as púca, then how can the blame be laid at my doorstep?’ The púca turned to look at Martín. ‘Do you not agree?’

Martín swallowed, breaking into the same cold sweat he used to experience when put on the spot by Father Suárez as he hurled casuistry questions at him. *Is suicide always a sin? Is it worse to commit murder or suicide? But what if a woman is about to be raped and there is an open window nearby? Is the sin decreased if she jumps out of the window to preserve her virtue? What if she doesn’t know what floor it is?*

‘You are a mathematician, then, I take it?’ he asked, trying to divert MacPhellimey’s attention.

‘A *philosopher of mathematics*,’ replied the púca, standing and stretching to his full, threatening height – he was almost two heads taller than Domhnall, not counting his horns, which rose twistedly to graze the thatch of the hut, and far broader than either of them. He seemed pleased by the question, though. ‘But it is the numerals that are indeed my concern. For see, if you have read that butterball Aquinas – and what decently read person has not? – you will know what the *fons et origo* of all is.’ He tilted his goat’s head at Martín, expecting, again, an answer. Fortunately, this one was easier: he still remembered his Aristotle.

‘The – er, the Unmoved Mover? God?’ Martín said, slightly dizzied. He had never thought he would end up discussing the Scholastics with an Irish goat-devil.

‘Precisely so. Or the prime mover, or the uncaused cause, or as I personally prefer to put it, the First Good and the Primal Truth. Number One. Thus truth, as you see, is an odd number. From which there necessarily follows that evil is even.’

Domhnall muttered angrily under his breath. ‘*For fuck’s sake.*’

Martín ignored him. ‘How so?’ he asked politely, as the púca seemed to be warming to the subject, and Martín wanted to keep on his good side.

‘Easily explained,’ replied the púca. ‘Even numbers are the Evil Numerals because they are uncloven: nothing stands between their halves. Sure lookit: with two people, it’s one pitched against the other, one to one, with naught else in between them. With four, it’s two to two, with six three to three, and so on and so forth etcetera. With odd numbers, however, there is always an odd one out between their halves, binding them even as it keeps them separate. Which is why truth is an odd number: it always stands apart from either side.’ He nodded at Domhnall. ‘Like justice, which is always the mediating third party. Or should be. You should ask your judge here about that.’

‘You are interested in the law too, then?’ Martín said.

‘Oh no. Oh no. I am a son of the ever-good, but my own personal numbers are all even. It is my strong belief that the vitality of my own evil, my very being itself, is a reaction to the rampant goodness of Number One, that is, of the First Truth. I am a corrective to mankind’s benevolent activities.’

Martín didn’t know what to reply to *that*, but Domhnall stepped forward. ‘Enough. What do you know about the threefold death, MacPhellimey? Who’s enacting it, and why?’

The púca raised a bushy black eyebrow, and his black goat's lips turned up in an improbable, sly smile. 'Now *that's* a far better example of an even number than I could ever aspire to, even if I were to live to see the Moon drop out of the sky.'

'You know about the killings. About the bodies dumped in the bog,' said Domhnall. It was not a question.

'I do,' replied the púca. 'As I know you found Cathal Dubh the pervert washed down the hill.'

'Tell me what you know.'

'You know what to do, brehon,' the púca grinned. 'Come on a ride with me and *then* we shall talk.'

He fixed his yellow eyes on Domhnall's spurs. After a moment, Domhnall let out his breath, defeated. 'Will you answer my questions truthfully if I ride?'

'I will, on my honour as púca. I will answer the questions of any human who dares to ride me, and tell the truth, too. Six horseloads of graveyard clay upon me if I don't.'

It was not as if Domhnall had any other options: he slowly bent down to remove his spurs. The púca's eyes glinted with malicious glee; and Martín saw, in a flash, the utter lawlessness of the creature, how he might get Domhnall killed without giving it a second thought – or not, it mattered little. It was all purely a matter of sheer *mischief* to him.

Martín kicked off his boots, strode in stockinged feet over to the púca, and hoisted himself onto his hairy back before Domhnall could react. 'I will ride. Go.'

The púca's black wool turned into coarse black mane between Martín's fingers, and his back rose and rose and lengthened and stretched with a cracking sound as if the púca's bones were breaking out of his skin, and Martín found himself riding on the back of a huge black stallion. He barely heard Domhnall's shout as the púca tossed his head back, wild yellow eyes blazing, whooping a cry of savage delight, and they were off.

*He's the Devil. He really is the Devil,* Martín thought again, clinging on for dear life as they charged along, the creature beneath him tossing and shaking and bucking at every turn. It was like trying to hang onto a furious unpredictable elemental fashioned from dark quicksilver by some deranged wizard, bent on killing its rider.

They came across hedges and brambles and undergrowth, and the púca never jumped to clear them, but rather hurled himself headlong into them, twigs and thorns and branches lashing across Martín's face. He flung himself wildly against boulders and rock walls, so as to smash Martín against them, and swung his course into the trees in their way, trying to scrape Martín off his back against their rough bark.

Martín just clung on in blind terror to the horse's thick neck, to the great strong muscles that bulged and shifted beneath the glossy coat of black hair, trying not to look down at the lethal blur of the ground rushing beneath him, not to listen to the thunder of hellish hooves that would trample him to death as soon as he let go.

'Having fun already?' the púca asked, and his horse-voice was like a rumble from the depths of a cave. Martín said nothing, but just dug his bare feet harder into the horse's flanks, clutched hard at his mane.

On and on they galloped at full tilt as the sun set and into the night, through moonlit fields, through forests and clearings, through villages and pastures and ploughed fields and fallow land. They barrelled down ravines, and Martín was certain, *certain*, that he would be dashed against the rocks any minute, but always he held on, arms and elbows and knees and thighs pivoting as one with the dark, savage body beneath. And on MacPhellimey ran like wildfire, his gallop punctuated by vicious sudden bursts of explosive energy, like some murderous mechanism gone haywire.

He didn't know for how long the deadly madcap ride went on: the moon had been rising when Domhnall and he had come to the púca's hut; now it shone full and ripe high in the night

sky, a cool, detached witness – or so it felt – to Martín’s coming death. His muscles no longer ached and burned as they had at first, and he was no longer seized with panic: it was as if his body had locked into insensate steel, and his mind had drifted off, unmoored, to remain sane. His overwhelmed senses could not register anything other than the cold night air whipping against him, the steam of the púca’s fierce heat rising against his face, the coarse black horsehair between his fingers .

‘Have you not tired yet?’ MacPhellimey asked, and, through Martín’s blurry thoughts, it seemed to him that it was the púca himself that sounded somewhat winded. Again, he said nothing. Just clung and clung.

Hours and hours passed, until time itself faded away. The moon rose to the highest point in the firmament, then dipped and disappeared again as the air started to turn brighter with the hovering glimmering dimness that comes before the dawn. The púca at least was no longer actively trying to unseat his rider: they just galloped and galloped, in the endless, frictionless motion of dreams.

The púca’s hooves now seemed to echo around them: they must be in another ravine. Martín had now shut his eyes and was leaning his forehead against the horse’s neck, blind, lost in the burning darkness of his own head.

‘Are you *done*?’ he heard a groaning voice, from afar. And then the creature beneath him suddenly shuddered and shook itself, as if a wave were rippling through the horse’s body. The púca staggered.

And fell, dragging Martín down to the ground with him.

It was only his wolf reflexes that made Martín roll out of the way before he was crushed by the tumbling dark mass of shattered horseflesh: he had not even fully come back to his senses yet. The stallion crashed and lay in a heaving, steaming heap, frothing at the mouth, hooves twitching.

‘Martín!’

A distant shout. More hooves – so they had not been an echo after all, but another horse, *Domhnall’s* horse – and then Domhnall dismounted and ran up to him, face taut with fear.

‘Martín!’ Domhnall crouched next to him, holding him, propping him up. ‘Are you hurt?’

Martín sat up, his body burning with the stiffness and the tension and the sudden release. ‘I’m all right. He didn’t throw me off. He just... collapsed.’ He pointed at the púca where he lay across from them, his steaming horse’s ribcage rising and falling like huge bellows.

Domhnall stared at him for a moment, then looked at the púca. ‘That’s... You didn’t fall off?’ He let out an astonished puff of breath. ‘I’ve been following you from a distance, all night, until he started to slow down. I don’t think anyone has managed to wear the púca out before. Ever.’

He slowly stood up and walked up to the fallen horse, stopping right in front of his head. ‘MacPhellimey. My friend has ridden with you, as you wanted. Now honour your word. Answer our questions.’

The púca rolled a daemonic yellow eye at Domhnall. It was intended to be a furious glare, but he just didn’t have the energy to pull it off. ‘Just give a fellow a break for a minute, will ye? *Jaysus.*’

Martín managed to sit up on his haunches, and as he did so, the huge black stallion’s body twisted and somehow folded on itself and shrank, and then the shaggy goat-headed púca was lying there at Domhnall’s feet, panting unhappily.

‘So,’ said Domhnall, prodding his flank with the tip of his boot. ‘You said you know about the killings and about Cathal Dubh. Who murdered them?’

‘That I do not know,’ replied the púca, with effort. ‘I swear. I only know about bodies left in the bog, not who put them there.’

‘Well then. Cathal Dubh has been found. Do you know where the other body is?’

The púca blinked at Domhnall, too exhausted to hide his confusion. ‘Which one?’

There were three of them: the short, hunched body of the blacksmith, and the two longer corpses on either side of him. They laid them out on a dry stretch of tussocks in Achadh Bhuachaill bog, to which MacPhellimey had grudgingly taken them once he had caught back his breath. He had turned himself back into a horse to get there, but could only manage a canter: so it must have been noon by the time they reached the bog, although it was so misty there it was hard to tell.

All the dead bodies had a leather strap tied with three knots around their necks. And their throats had all been cut.

‘Who are *these*?’ Martín asked, still in shock at the macabre crop MacPhellimey had led them to.

The púca, who was now in goat shape again and sat nonchalantly astraddle the large root of a tree, on a somewhat higher level so as to avoid the peat and the water, shrugged. ‘How would I know? All I knew was that new bodies were laid to rest here. I have an affinity for such things. I felt a disturbance in the numerical balance.’

The two unexpected bodies were those of men in their thirties or so, Martín guessed, although it was hard to tell, covered in peat as they still mostly were. Domhnall scooped some stagnant water nearby and tried to clear their faces somewhat. It was hard to see through all the caked mud, but all three of them seemed frozen in the terror in which death found them, their expressions akin to that they’d seen on Cathal Dubh’s face. One of the dead men, Martín noticed, had a cauliflower ear, an inborn malformation or the result of one too many fights. He stared at the vulnerable, gourd-like head, the skin wrinkled like a prune, and felt a sudden pang of pity for these nameless slaughtered dead, dumped and forgotten like carcasses, like refuse.

‘Do you know them?’ Martín asked.



‘Don’t think so. They look like villagers. Can’t say I recognise them.’ Domhnall turned toward MacPhellimey. ‘You said the triple death is an instance of great evil. What did you mean?’

‘Oh, this is very old, one of the first evils on this island. A very old, primaeval instance of the Number Two, indeed. I would also say that those three knots are naught but a mockery, but then the ancients’ understanding of the numerals was never very astute.’

Domhnall stepped up to the púca, glaring at him. ‘*What is this*, MacPhellimey? Who did this?’

‘What do you call an evil that is like the earth, an all-devouring mother unto her children, ever consumed by an unquenchable thirst for men’s blood? It’s always been here and will always be here, for as long as there are men in Ireland. Or rather, for as long as there are men in the world. Men persist, nay, delight in giving her their blood and their souls. There’s nothing you can do about it: you can’t save men from themselves.’

‘*Speak clear.*’

MacPhellimey stared at Domhnall, his yellow goat-eyes shining with sinister amusement. ‘I said I would answer truly, not that my answers would be clear to you. It is not my fault if the span of your wits is so regrettably limited, brehon.’

‘Is that all you have to say?’

‘What is it Solomon says? “The horseleech hath two daughters, crying, Give, give”,’ the púca said. He clarified, a condescending lecturer: ‘That’s the two things that are never satisfied, that never say, it is enough: the grave, and the womb. “Man that is born of woman...” etcetera etcetera. That is my answer, and it is true, and it is more than enough. It is all you need to know.’

He dropped suddenly off the large root on which he was perched, as if falling back, and swung and turned in mid-air, and was gone.