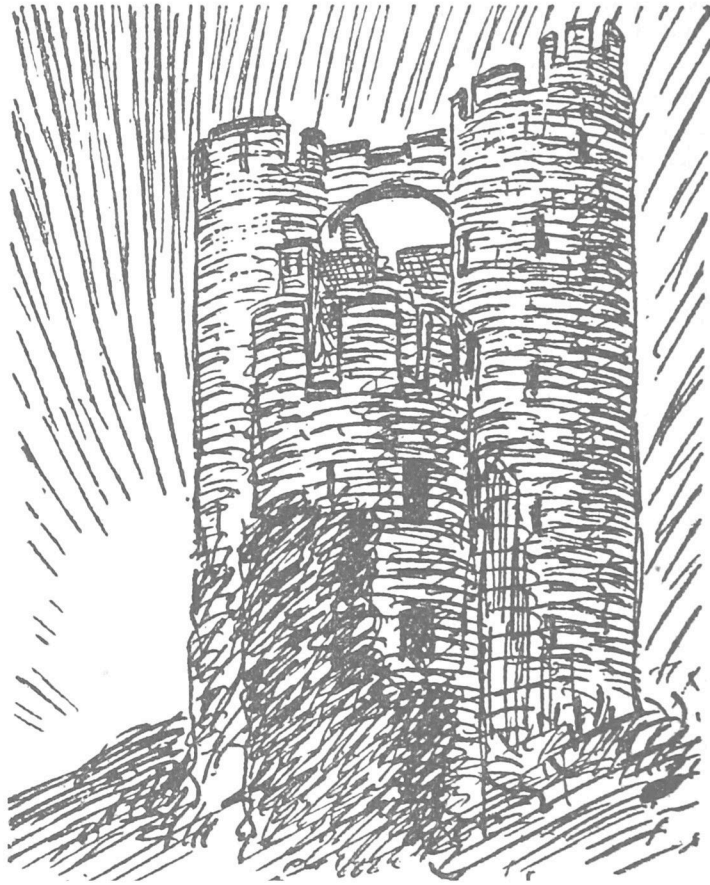


❁
Strange Roads

❁
*With the Gods
in Spring*

By Arthur Machen

STRANGE ROADS



"A ruin, and yet a noble place."

Limited Edition.

Strange Roads

By
Arthur
Machen

Sketches by Joseph Simpson, R.B.A.

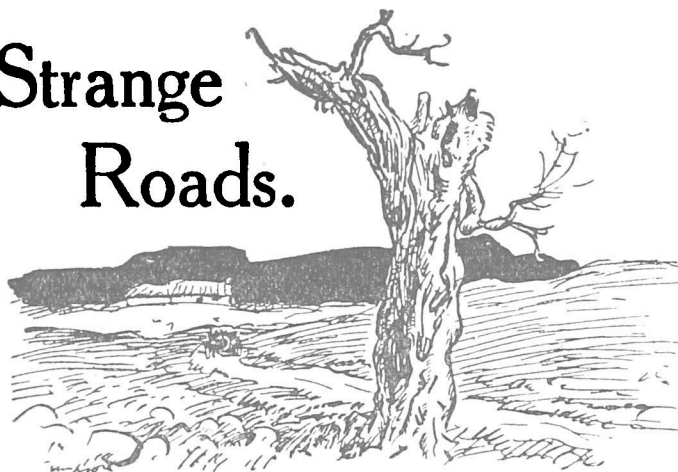
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Strange Roads.



THE strangest road I know is
also the shortest.

Far in the West, a byway,
thick and green with the ferns on
its banks, and shadowed and cool
with overhanging ash trees, diverges
at a certain point, and offers the
choice of right and left. The way
to the right will take you to a castle,

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that most of us are content to class amongst old things. It was built, this castle of Manorbier, when the Normans first came into Wales, in the twelfth century. It stands now a ruin, and yet a noble place, with its walls sloping outward as they come to the ground—"battering," the builders call this device. It stands high on a sort of inland cliff or promontory, looking westward toward the bay, whose crimson bastions and bulwarks of old red sandstone are crowned with shimmering bracken and golden gorse and purple heather. A noble place, a noble aspect ; Gerald Barry, called

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Giraldus Cambrensis, who was born in the castle, said that it was the fairest place that he had ever seen.

But this is, after all, the new castle, although it is seven centuries old. If you take the way to the left, you appear to go inland and away from the sea. A short lane brings you up to a high, windswept place, whence the blue sea is to be seen far away towards Tenby, but nowhere before you. And then you go down into a gentle valley, and here the road becomes a field track, which ascends another hill and passes through the yard of a whitewashed farmhouse, gleaming in the sun.

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"A whitewashed farmhouse, gleaming in the sun."

Here is a height once more, and still no hint of the sea. The track has become a path which goes under tall hedges of thorn by pasture and ploughed lands ; and then, at a turn of the hedge, far away below, suddenly appear the blue fields of the sea—

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foam-flecked, mingling in a haze in the distance with the blue sky and the shining air. But against the sky and above the sea there rises the fortifications of the old castle—a prehistoric stronghold.

The ground falls from your feet steeply down a great slope of gorse and heather and bramble, and then swells up green to the sky. And on this seaward height rise these smooth, rounded, turfy circumvallations, as if one huge green billow were piled high above another with a hollow place between them.

I suppose it was a fort of refuge, a place where a certain number of

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the tribe could hold out for a while with their backs to a precipitous cliff and the sea ; and if you climb the green billows of the outer walls, you come upon the road I mentioned—the short road.

It seems to lead easily to the very heart of the fort, and I can imagine the hosts of the besiegers foaming up it, howling triumph, their rear-guard pressing them on. An easy way, and then a sharp turn : and the short road rushes down swiftly to the sheer edge of the cliff, and to the hollow-sounding sea far below.

Another strange road I know is by Marlborough. It leads up from

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"A white track on a wild, silent hill."

the town to the high downs—for all I know, it was the road on which Tom Smart was driving when he had the adventure of the chair, which turned into a little old gentleman in the roadside inn. It was in the dusk of a summer evening, and the road presently became hedge-

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less, a white track on a wild, silent hill. The down fell away steeply on one side, and I noticed, as I went along, that little paths went twisting and winding down the turf, pausing by very ancient, low, twisted thorns, and then trickling and turning away towards the dimness of the valley. Somehow, I know not why, these queer, winding paths by the old thorns made my companion and myself think of the People—that is, the fairies—and we turned back again towards Marlborough. And suddenly, quite instantly, without any preparation of a distant sound, soft at first, and growing louder by

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degrees, we both heard the sharp rattle of footfalls coming behind, and gaining on us. We looked back, fully expecting to see the figure of someone in a great hurry and making pace ; but no one was visible. And, though the air was now growing dim and the general aspect of the country indistinct, yet the road, white and chalky, without the shadow of hedges, was quite clear before us. While we turned and stopped the sound ceased, but when we went on, wondering a little, the clatter of hurrying steps was at once renewed and increased, as if the pursuit or the flight had grown sharper.

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It was not an echo ; the road was soft with dust, and our own footfalls made no distinguishable sound. The noise that followed us was rather that of iron-shod feet beating on a track of granite. We were glad, I think, when we came to that part of the down which is just over Marlborough. Here some preparations for a fair were being made ; tents were rising, and roundabouts were being jointed together, and red flares were burning. The rattle of pursuing footsteps ceased as we saw the glimmer of the lamps in the darkness of the little town below. I do not explain : I must simply suppose

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that we heard some noise which sounded like footsteps, but was not footsteps—that is all.

I spoke of the strange little, wandering downhill tracks by the thorns as suggesting to me, somehow or other, the thought of the Fairy Folk, so I think I should explain, before I go on, that I am not one of those happy people who have only to think of fairies to be hallucinated, whether visibly or audibly. I wish I were, for the actual roads of life are often, or always, gritty and punishing to tender feet, and it would be well and happy indeed if one could be rapt at the

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desire into the tender grass-grown ways of fairyland. And this reminds me, and again reminds me ; but, first of all, of a gentleman of an ancient Irish family that I once knew. Irish, I call him, for his ancestors had been settled in Ireland from remote times, but they were of Norman - Welsh blood, and of the ruling caste, not of the peasantry. Well, this young fellow and I were talking literature together, and especially Mr. Yeats and the new Irish literature, and I was expressing some bewilderment at the fact that men of character, and of

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apparent good faith, talked of seeing fairies in their daily walks.

“Is it,” I said, “some kind of symbolism? Or what do they mean?”

“What should they mean,” said young Mr. Geraldine, “but the truth? Can’t you see the fairies when you want to? I’ve only to wish, to see them; and I’ve often seen them sitting on the stone walls by the mountain roads in Galway.”

And then again : Six years ago I was in Belfast. I was on a journalistic mission connected with the Ulster movement, which was perplexing and threatening in the

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September of 1913. I went with an open mind on the Irish question. On the one hand, I certainly had no sympathies with treason and disaffection, and I thought—and think still—that the Home Rule movement had been advanced by odious and cruel and criminal methods. On the other hand, as all my friends will testify, I am not an extreme Protestant—to put it mildly, or, as the rhetoricians would say, to use an agreeable meiosis—and I had a notion that I should find something extremely dour and harsh among the “Black Prodestans” of the north-east of Ireland.

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Well, I went mainly, or almost entirely, among the people who were on the Orange side in politics, and I must say that I have never encountered a more cheery, kindly, or more hospitable folk. They could not do enough to show me the sights and the ways of Belfast, and they laughed at the bigotries and the furies of the less intelligent of their party.

After I had looked round and about Belfast, I said I should like to see a little of the country, and one of these stern Orangemen immediately said he would take me out into the country in his car. We

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went some twelve miles out of the town, and when we were about half-way on our journey, there was something in the aspect of the country on either side of the road that impressed me strangely. I do not know how to put my impression into definite words, but, somehow, the wild hills that rose in the distance before us were of an outland form ; the rocks that surged suddenly from the land to right and left suggested fortalices of a bygone people, and the very thorn trees that grew in the fields had about them an aspect of concealed mystery.

Some devil of mischief moved me

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to ask my host, a leading Presbyterian and an eminent solicitor of Belfast, whether there were many fair'y castles about that part of the country. I expected to be withered. I thought that McPhee Gillespie would advise me to talk to my friends the Catholics, if I wanted to hear about drivelling superstitions. To my amazement, he replied in a matter-of-fact tone, in the tone that an Englishman would use if he were asked whether there were any county families of note in his neighbourhood :

“ No, there are not many fair'y raths about here ; they're more

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Antrim way. But I can show you plenty of fairy thorns. There," he said, pointing to an old, crooked thorn tree growing in the middle of a meadow, "that's a fairy thorn; and I can tell you that the farmer who rents that land—I know him well; he's a strong Presbyterian—would rather cut off his right hand than lay a finger on that tree."

We passed through a dreary village; the ugly houses full on the street, without a sign of a garden or a flower anywhere.

"It's uneasy here sometimes," said Mr. Gillespie. "You see, about half the people are Protestants and

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the other half Catholics. That's because we're getting higher. You see, the Ulster settlers took all the good land in the valleys and drove the Catholics away, and the higher you go, and the poorer the soil, the more Catholics you'll find." (He was a fair man.)

But I had noticed that, though there were no gardens, nearly every house had a mountain ash planted by its door. I said :

" You seem very fond of the mountain ash here."

" Well, he replied, " the people think that they keep away the fairies. And, as a matter of fact," he added,

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with a queer smile, "you'll see a good many mountain ash trees planted round my little place out here that I am taking you to."

Then Mr. Gillespie began talking about flax, and the new and improved treatment of it which had speeded up the linen manufacture tremendously; he was a thoroughly practical man. But when we got to his country house, I found, as he had said, that it was fended and hedged about by mountain ash trees.

The saddest of all roads is the road that has been murdered. I know such a road in Wales. It wound to right and left in a goodly

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and leisurely fashion up a long, steep hill. The road was narrow and deep down in the ground. Every fern grew in splendour on those high banks ; the wild strawberry was there, richly scarlet ; the fretted leaves of the wild geranium were as if they had come from the margin of a golden, illuminated thirteenth-century missal ; the arums showed purple rods in the spring and red berries in the autumn ; meadow-sweet flourished where wells of cold water trickled out of the limestone rock. And high overhead, strange, twisted, wizened oaks mingled their leaves across the road ; and so here,

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on the hottest day in summer, there was coolness and a pleasant green shade.

The lane was narrow and steep, but it was well enough for the slow farm traffic, for the parson's trap and the doctor's gig. But a wealthy city man has a house and many motor cars in that part. And so one year I found that beautiful lane destroyed. All the oak trees had been cut down; the road had been straightened, as if it were the permanent way of a railway; the banks had been sliced on either side in the fashion of a railway cutting. They were bare. Flowers and ferns,

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and all the intermingled wonderful growth of ivy and honeysuckle and briony had gone ; the wells of cold water ran no more from the limestone rock.



WITH THE GODS IN SPRING

With the Gods in Spring

By
Arthur
Machen

Sketches by H. R. Millar

D*



WE shall go on seeking it to the end, so long as there are men on the earth. We shall seek it in all manner of strange ways ; some of them wise, and some of them unutterably foolish. But the search will never end.

“ It ? ” “ It ” is the secret of

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things ; the real truth that is everywhere hidden under outward appearances ; the end of the story, as it were ; the few final words that make every doubtful page in the long book plain, that clear up all bewilderments and all perplexities, and show how there was profound meaning and purpose in passages apparently obscure and purposeless. These are the words which, once read, throw their light and radiance back over all the book ; as the furnace fires blazing up suddenly at night in my own country in the west, shine far away among woods, and in dark valleys, and discover

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his path to the wanderer in a wild, dim world.

Doubtless there is a secret, an illuminating secret, hidden beneath all the surfaces of things ; and perhaps the old alchemists were thinking of that secret when they spoke of the Powder of Projection, the Philosopher's Stone, that turned all it touched into gold.

There are many ways of the great quest of the secret. Some of them fill me with an immeasurable weariness. Not very long ago, there was a picture in a daily paper with an odd history attached to it. The picture was a head of the Christ. It

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was a photograph of a painting done by a lady who was said to have no artistic skill whatever. But she had worked under “spirit control,” and produced this marvel. The great spiritualist authorities said it was the finest head of the Christ that had ever been painted.

Well, I looked at it, and said, “alas !” within my soul. I am not a painter-man myself, nor a critic of painter-men. But—if one has looked at certain of the master-works with a humble heart, one has learnt a little, a very little, no doubt, but still something of the elements. The L.C.C. schoolboy learns at quite

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an early age that “dog” is not spelt “c-a-t;” and nothing will move him from this secure faith. So I, with this newspaper photograph of Mrs. or Miss Somebody’s head



“Technically, the work was far from good.”

of the Christ. I could see that it was feeble, sentimental, sloppy, with about as much relation to painting or religion as the poems of the

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late Miss Frances Ridley Havergal have to literature or the faith. Painting men told me that, technically, the work was far from good ; and I have no doubt that they were right.

Well, a few days afterwards, another photograph appeared in the newspaper. This also was of a painting of the head of the Christ. This had been painted by another lady, a Swede, I think, some years ago ; also, it was said, under spirit influence. It was obvious that picture number one had been suggested by picture number two, and indeed it was stated that the English spirit

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artist had had opportunities of seeing the work of the Swedish spirit artist. And then the English artist said that she had nothing to do with spirits.

There it is ; and it is no matter, as old Mr. Kemble, the actor, used to observe. But the secret is not to be found by that foolish way.

It is long years ago ; but I once saw a little glint of the secret, merely a flash of the great radiance, noted at the time, and adored, yet forgotten in a moment, and yet never at all forgotten, but remembered still through all the heavy years that have gone by, and growing clearer,

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it seems, as the days darken and the shadows lengthen on the hill.

A long while ago ; forty years ago, or near it, my two friends, Bill and Jack and I set out for a walk early of an afternoon in March. We are all white-haired now ; we have been grilled and roasted and boiled and fried in the fire of life ; then, we were raw and merry, and I was the youngest and the rawest of the three. But we were all in the mood of adventure ; we would go to Usk—a little town in our country, far in the west—and go to it by a new way. Now, one ascertains the surest 'bus route, or the

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quickest tubes, and sticks to the way when found ; I should hate anyone who proposed to me the theory that it would be fun to get into the City from St. John's Wood by way of Clerkenwell or Pentonville ; but we have come to the age of iron. So, then, Bill and Jack and I set out for Usk, and would find a new way of getting to that noble city of two thousand souls or thereabouts. It was governed by a Portreeve in those days ; I severed my connection with the Liberal Party when Lord Rosebery brought in a Bill about Unreformed Corporations, and, like an evil enchanter, turned the Portreeve

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and Bailiffs into a Local Government Board.

So we set out for Usk, and we took the high road that led to Pontypool under the mountains—not a bit like the road to Usk—and then left it by a lane which seemed likely to bear towards our desired end. Likely so to bear, but quite as likely not so to bear; for lanes twist and turn and bend in the land of Gwent; still, we were going to Usk, and therefore—mark that “therefore,” rationalist—therefore, we knew that all lanes led to Usk: Bill and Jack and I.

It was a great day of March. The

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"It was a great day of March."

wind shrilled
and rustled and
shivered and
shook all the
dead woods.
Though it was
so keen and
cold, it came, if
I remember
well, over the
wall of the great
and high moun-
tain of the west,
and drove the
white and grey
rolling clouds
before it to east-

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ward over the billows of the land, over those hidden valleys where the little brooks rush clear and swift under the alders, over the hills where the pine trees stand, over the solemn, hanging woods that were still and sombre in their winter wear. We went along our lane, laughing, because we knew—note that “because,” atheist—that it was most unlikely that we should ever get to Usk, and because we knew that we should most certainly get there.

Presently the lane grew too probable. It seemed as if it were really leading us in the right direction. This was not to be endured, and so

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we chose the first stile that offered itself. I will say, frankly, that reason was not absolutely outraged ; it was not infallibly certain that the path opening from the stile was more likely to lead to Constantinople than to Usk ; still, it seemed an improbable track, and so we took it gaily.

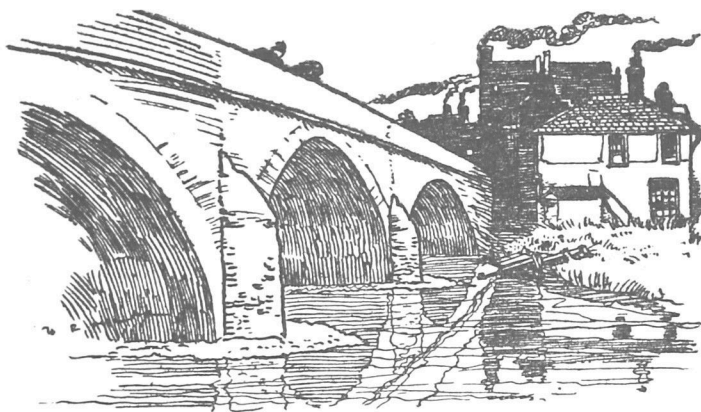
I wish I could remember all that way. Ah ! in these dim and late and dreary hours ; if one could recollect the splendour of the dawn. But, to be true, I remember very little ; only the wonder, which is always a wonder, of passing through a new land and seeing things which

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are strange, and thereby receiving a revelation of the unknown ; and this revelation you may get as surely in a country lane as if you went to the uttermost parts of the earth. But somewhere on this walk, as we talked of Moll and Meg and strange experiences, unfit for ladies, that glint and twinkling of the high supernal light came to me.

We were skirting a wild little hill. It was a place of rough grass, winter withered ; of bracken clumps turned brown ; of brambles that had forgotten autumn berries, black and rich ; of the twisted, ancient thorn tree, dark and dreaming of fairy-

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"Over the bridge into the street of Usk."

land. And as we passed on our way, while the keen wind shook the bare, brown boughs as it went roaring down the valley to the brook, while the huge clouds rolled on to the sea ; there I saw on the hillside, under a low black thorn bush rising from withered bracken, the green leaves and pale yellow blossoms of a

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daffodil, shaking in that high, cold wind.

Vere Deus. It was forgotten as Bill and Jack and I came infallibly by our impossible way over the bridge into the street of Usk, and to the Three Salmons, that inn of old and happy memory. Forgotten then, but remembered always: the shining apparition of the god.

