



Black Spring

ALISON CROGGON

I

After the last long winter, I needed to get as far away from the city as I possibly could. My life there filled me with a weariness of disgust; I was tired of endless conversations in lamp-lit cafés with overeducated aesthetes like myself, tired of my apartment with its self-consciously tasteful artworks and its succession of witty visitors, of the endless jostling for status among the petty literati, the sniping envy and malicious gossip. There was also the question of a lady; there had been an unwise involvement, which on her part had flamed into an uncontrollable passion and which had caused me considerable discomfort. She was married to the General Secretary of the Writers' Guild, a man of considerable influence in the literary world, and if the affair had been pursued much further, it might have materially damaged my future prospects. This affair had caused me much nervous strain over the previous year, and my physician advised me that I ought to take a rest cure.

I thought idly of touring the glittering capitals of the wider world, but this seemed too much like my present life. More

than anything, I hankered for solitude. Then I remembered my boyhood fascination with the wild men of the Black Mountains and the grim romantic landscapes of the North. Perhaps I could find what I needed in my own country. . . . I made inquiries and at last, through a relative of a friend of mine, secured the lease of a house in Elbasa, a hamlet in the center of the northern plains. It was, I was told, unusually luxurious for a hinterland dwelling, belonging to some scion of the northern royals, although it seemed he lived elsewhere. But its owner had not permitted it to fall into dereliction: an efficient couple kept it in order and would act as my servants, should I take the lease.

Thus it was, in the early hours of a frosty spring morning, that I summoned a hansom cab to convey me to the train station and began the long journey to the Northern Plateau.

Naturally, despite my scientific and skeptical bent (I scorn womanly superstition), I had taken some precautions. There are too many stories about the naïf who travels into the wild with an arrogant faith in the superior qualities of civilization, only to find himself tragically undone, for me to be utterly inattentive to the protection of my person. I visited Aron Lamaga, the most famous of the city wizards, and availed myself of certain costly charms to protect me while I was on the road and in my remote residence. It seemed only sensible.

Aron Lamaga lives in the Wizards' Quarter, and although certain of my acquaintances frequent this area, for it has reputedly the liveliest taverns in the city, I confess that I do not generally join them. For the most part, the populace is a mass of quacks, charlatans, eccentrics, lunatics, and criminals. The police watch of the city does not venture there, by tacit consent; it is not merely that the bewildering tangle of narrow alleyways, dark workshops, and strangely dilapidated mansions holds perils for the unwary stranger, but that in this quarter — or so I

have heard—natural laws do not hold. It is said that maps are not reliable guides: streets which are bustling thoroughfares on one day are simply not there the next; buildings that are tall and substantial on Monday, on Tuesday might appear to be miserable hovels or a patch of wasteland punctuated by dock weeds; and those who venture there without guidance not infrequently disappear without a trace.

There are some wizards of note whose workshops are in less disreputable quarters, but Aron Lamaga is generally agreed to be the most illustrious of all of his profession. The prime minister relies on his astrological advice, and, it is rumored, consults him on certain tricky and secret affairs of state, such as when he wishes to rid himself discreetly of an inconvenient person. Lamaga is reportedly without parallel in the subtle business of disappearing citizens and is capable, it is said, of erasing the memory of a man, even from those who have known and loved him all his life, so that it seems as if he never existed. He is said to be much in demand in the criminal underworld for the same reason. I cannot say whether this is merely dark gossip, but his reputation, whether true or no, certainly makes Lamaga a person whom it would be wise to fear.

Thus it was not without trepidation that I hired a guide and plunged into the crowded streets of the Wizards' Quarter in search of Lamaga's mansion. But I was also, I confess, extremely curious. In the event, my meeting with the great wizard turned out to be a little anticlimactic. Instead of the exotic chamber I had anticipated, lined with an abundance of purple velvet curtains and smelling of exotic incense, its walls inscribed with sigils and crowded with grimoires and glass alembics and other suchlike magical apparatus, I was ushered into a room of surprising ordinariness, such as might have belonged to any one of my wealthier acquaintances. It was a conventional drawing room, comfortably furnished, albeit with some drawings and

paintings on the wall which eschewed ostentation and showed him to be an art collector of considerable and informed taste.

The man himself was dressed like a rich merchant. He was slightly stout and had a curiously unexceptionable face, by which I mean that you would pass him in the street and think him like a hundred other reputable citizens. There was absolutely nothing about his appearance that gave any clue to his profession. He listened politely to my requests, nodded in a businesslike fashion, asked me to wait for a short time, and returned with a small velvet bag. Inside were a silver ring, the interior of which was engraved with some arcane figures, which he instructed me I was to wear at all times, and a small glass phial with a dropper. It contained an emerald-green liquid.

“You must place one droplet on your pillow wherever you sleep,” said Lamaga. “Also on the threshold of every outer door. This will protect you from most of the evil influences you are likely to encounter in the hinterlands.”

“Most?” I queried as I closely examined the phial. It was certainly of unusually exquisite workmanship.

A very slight spasm — perhaps of annoyance at my question — passed over his face, and for the briefest of instants I had an apprehension of danger, as if I had unknowingly brushed too close to a sleeping tiger. “I cannot protect you from imprudent behavior on your own part,” he said shortly. “If you act with common sense, you will avoid uncommon trouble.”

He stood up, and my interview was clearly over. A little disappointed — I had, after all, expected somewhat more excitement from this visit — I handed over a considerable amount of silver and allowed myself to be bowed out of his house by his very respectable butler.

My journey to Elbasa was uneventful. I took the train to the end of the line, at the far edge of the lowlands, and from there

I hired a carriage to take me to the Northern Plateau. You can imagine with what eagerness I watched through the curtained windows as the green and fertile plains of my birth gave way to the stony beauty of the hinterlands. The well-cobbled thoroughfares of the city changed to rustic cart roads, and thence to roads which were sometimes little more than dirt tracks.

On the first day of traveling by carriage, we began to climb. The lime trees and beeches and oaks of the lowlands thinned and then began to disappear altogether, giving way to conifers and low, wind-bitten thorn trees and scrub. The weather was clear and cold, the sky an icy blue. I felt my heart becoming lighter the farther we drew from the city.

At noon on the second day, we reached the Northern Plateau. We stopped at an inn for a hasty luncheon, and as I stepped out of the carriage, I looked up and my breath was taken away: it was my first sight of the magnificent heights of the Black Mountains, which hitherto had been but a shadow on my horizon, cloaked in legend. The sheer brute fact of them was awe-inspiring: their crags heaved up into the distant sky, their crowns shrouded with gray cloud, their grim sides falling with an obdurate, oddly graceless beauty down to the Northern Plateau, the Land of Death, which now stretched before me, gray and flat under a thin sprinkling of snow.

Elbasa was in the center of the Plateau, on the main road that ran through this region, and consequently one of the more notable settlements in this part of the country. When I had expressed my alarm at being near a town, speaking of my desire to leave all urban life behind, my friend Grosz, through whom I had secured my lodging, had laughed immoderately, and assured me that, in a region where most villages boasted at most a half dozen houses, I was unlikely to encounter anything that *I* would recognize as a town.

"My dear Hammel," he said when he had regained his

composure, "I know that you have not traveled, as I have, through the Land of Death. You may think the name fanciful; let me assure you, it is not. There are few grimmer visions than that desolate landscape of cemeteries! It is the home of vendetta, remember. Death has a different meaning in the North: its people live beneath its sigil, and death is the coin of their economy. The landscape has, I assure you, a most romantic beauty, but it is the harshest of beauties. Here you will see life in its most rugged state of nakedness! You will be longing for the crowded streets of the city ere long!" Here he even smirked.

A little offended, I reminded myself that Grosz was in his cups and thus not quite responsible for his expression, and I replied, somewhat tartly, that I desired, above all, the grace of solitude and knew very well how to keep my own company. And that, moreover, having been brought up on a country estate myself, I was not unused to the rougher pleasures of country living.

Still smiling, my friend leaned forward and poked me in the ribs. "Let me remind you, then, to avoid at least one of those rougher pleasures," he said. "The girls in the Land of Death are not for the taking, not like the country girls of the lowlands. They come at a heavy price."

"I am well aware of that," I said curtly.

"Well, don't you forget it," answered Grosz more soberly. "I know your disposition, Hammel. And I swear, I have never seen such eyes as those of some of the upland women. But even to glance at them is perilous. And I'm not talking about the chance of being knifed. Cursing means something quite different in the Plateau. . . ."

For a moment I caught his seriousness, and shuddered. I had a sudden vivid memory of having seen one of the upland wizards in town a year or so before. He carried the staff of his vocation but otherwise wore merely the coarse garb of a

highland shepherd. He had with him a mute, a small boy whose tongue had been cut out, as all wizards did a few centuries ago. Like many barbaric archaisms, it was a custom still practiced in the Land of Death. I shuddered to see the mutilated boy and wondered why I had never heard what happened to these boys when they outgrew their use: were they killed, or abandoned? Or perhaps they received some reward for their services and afterward lived blameless but voiceless lives?

The wizard's bearing was arrogant to the point of insolence, and he walked with the long steps of one unused to narrow spaces; I noticed that even in that crowded street, people scrambled out of his way. He cast his flashing eyes around him, his mouth tight with contempt. As I walked past him, staring in my curiosity, I unwittingly met his eyes, and my heart went absolutely cold; for a moment I almost thought he had stabbed me. Filled with an inchoate terror, I managed to pass him by and turned the nearest corner almost at a run. There I stopped, gasping for breath, at a loss to explain the panic that had so briefly possessed me.

Yes, everyone knew of the curses of the wizards of the hinterland, and of the Blood Laws and their vendettas. But, after all, it was the reason I wanted to go there, to see for myself the savage customs of those parts. There, my friend told me, life was stripped to its most essential: every action was inscribed with the sigil of death, and the hinterlanders, man and woman, obeyed its implacable laws unquestioningly. There, my friend said, waxing lyrical as he often did after a number of wines, life found its true, obsidian meaning.

"But stay away from the women," he said again, looking at me narrowly over his glass. "Unless you too wish to be drawn into its tragic mechanisms. For there is no escaping the northern laws once you excite their attention."

I recalled this conversation as I gazed at the Black Mountains,

whose somber weight even from this distance oppressed my heart. For a moment I regretted my decision to come to the Plateau; I was on the verge of telling my coachman to turn and head south again, back to the orchards of my youth. But something in me — perhaps the thought of my friend’s unspoken mockery should I return so swiftly — rebelled at my hesitation. And so I said nothing but bowed my head to enter the low door of the mean inn, where I was to enjoy my mean luncheon.

I arrived at Elbasa two days later, on a day of cold, soaking rain. The Plateau, or what I could see of it through the veils of gray water, looked especially desolate and friendless. My spirits began to fail; I wondered what could possibly have possessed me to visit this cheerless part of the world when perhaps I could have been lying in the pleasure barges of the Water City or wandering through the incomparable artworks in the museums of the City of Light.

We passed several small villages, each of them, as my friend had said, no more than half a dozen houses. The houses were built of the black basalt of that region and were humble dwellings for the most part, slant-roofed and tiled with gray slate. Few of them had more, I judged, than two or three basic rooms. Despite my friend’s assurances of comfort, I began to feel rather less sanguine about the house that awaited me in Elbasa.

The only items of real interest along the road were the stone towers outside some of the villages. They stood like grim fingers pointing skyward, windowed only with glassless slits covered with shutters, sometimes reaching to four stories high, but thin and narrow: they could not have been more than ten paces square at their base. These were, I knew, the *odu*, the houses of refuge where a man with the vendetta on his head could live unmolested but exiled from human society, emerging at night in the hours of amnesty to gather food. Fascinated, I wondered

how many poor souls lived out their years cooped in darkness inside these comfortless places, and whether that life was really any better than a quick death by bullet on an empty road.

Spring was yet to visit the Northern Plateau: the fruit trees were stunted and innocent of blossom, and the flat grasses sere and yellow. The only green was the dark dress of some ragged-looking and solitary pine trees. Forlorn goats and damp chickens picked their way around the village middens in an apathetic fashion, and I saw the occasional dumpy woman, clothed in black from head to foot, going about the household tasks. Outside every village was a simple unfenced graveyard, with graves framed by squares of stone. Quite frequently, I saw single memorials by the road, nowhere near any visible habitation, gray cairns of rock dark with rain. After a few miles punctuated by these melancholy signs, I began to feel that I was traveling through a single vast cemetery.

On the road we passed very few people; there was the occasional darkly clothed traveler on foot, trudging stoically onward, his head bowed against the rain, his rifle slung across his back, draped in sacking to protect it from the rain. I stared dully out of the carriage window, bored and cold, my spirits increasingly oppressed.

We were passing yet another solitary walker when he glanced up incuriously at the carriage and briefly met my eyes. My breath stopped: although he was a young man, and of considerable beauty in the dark-browed fashion of those of the hinterland, he seemed a living corpse. His eyes were absolutely devoid of light, and his features pale and insensible as carven marble. The rain ran unchecked down his face, as if he really were a statue. My heart quickened as I noted the white band he wore around his right arm. This, then, was one of the Dead; my first sight of those who walked under the sigil of the vendetta. The band around his right arm indicated that he had killed a

man but was still in his month of grace; after the month passed, the band would be worn on his left arm, and he could meet his death at any time in the daylight hours. Unless, that is, he took refuge in the *odu*, fated never to see the sun again.

I looked back as his lone figure dwindled into the distance, struck to the heart by the man's tragic beauty. He seemed indeed like an angel of death, walking through a landscape of the dead. For the first time I began really to understand my friend's words about the Northern Plateau. But perversely the sight cheered me: perhaps, after all, I would find something to interest me in this godforsaken place.

My carriage clattered into Elbasa's tiny central square shortly before dusk that same day. A few vagrant sunbeams peeked through a low rent in the clouds and lent the square a little shabby warmth. While my coachman ventured off into the rain for directions to the house, I contemplated Elbasa gloomily out my carriage window. On one side of the square was a tavern, on the other what I presumed to be the house of the mayor. In the middle was an ancient and stunted lime tree, still bare of leaf, a forlorn version of its gay southern cousins, and underneath that a worn stone seat by a rank pond of blackish water choked with rotting leaves. A grimy shop and rows of shuttered houses completed the melancholy impression.

After almost a week of constant travel, I was anxious to leave my carriage and settle into a comfortable house. I longed for a hot bath and then a glass of Madeira by a roaring fire before I fell gratefully into a comfortable bed. That I managed to get these things at the end of my journey was, I confess, a source of considerable astonishment.

My friend's report had not erred: the house I had leased for the spring months was indeed luxurious by the standards of the Northern Plateau. It was but a little way out of the village

and set at a pleasing angle on a low rise, which was the closest they came to a hill in these parts. It could not escape the usual pines, which sheltered the house from the harsh winds that often swept down from the mountains. It was known as the Red House, because it did not have the ubiquitous slate roofing but cheery clay tiles, which someone must have imported at great trouble and expense from the South. As I peered curiously out my carriage, I saw the last of the day's light touching its roof, making it appear almost luminous, and it seemed to me miraculous to see such a thing in this dour landscape of grays. I could also see a butter-yellow light streaming from the windows, and my heart lifted.

Once inside, I met the couple who kept the house, a taciturn and courteous man named Zef and his wife, Anna. They were respectably dressed and mannered, locally bred but well trained, and although the house was not large — running perhaps to six or seven main rooms — it had about it an air of order and prosperity which was already a little alien to me, accustomed as I had become over the past few days to low-roofed inns with mattresses more notable for their livestock than their softness. Although it felt a little foolish in these polite surroundings, I carefully anointed the thresholds of the house and my pillow with a droplet from the phial Aron Lamaga had given me, as had become my habit since reaching the Plateau. To complete my satisfaction, I found that Anna was a superior cook: she made a dish of tripe and onions that evening that nourished the soul as much as the flesh. You can imagine how I congratulated myself on having found such an oasis of civilization in this rude country; with what relief I lay down that night between fresh linen sheets; and how, before I drifted off into well-earned slumber, I turned my mind with a fresh excitement to the prospects of my new situation.

II

The morning of my arrival, after an excellent breakfast of blood sausage and chitterlings, I was sufficiently restored from the rigors of my journey to contemplate my surroundings with some degree of amicability. It helped that, after days of driving rain, the day dawned clear and bright. The pale sunshine of early spring struck blindingly silver off the puddles and made of the wet grass a wealth of trembling prisms. I stared out my bedroom window as I dressed. It overlooked the back of the house, which boasted a wintry vegetable garden and the compulsory stunted orchard, and in the distance I could see the Black Mountains, clearly visible today, although their craggy heights were shrouded by mist. I found myself humming the mournful but beautiful ballads of my childhood about the shepherds of the Land of Death. The songs made me think of the youth I had seen the day before: he could scarcely have reached full manhood, but his face seemed ageless, as if death had already lifted him out of the stream of time.

I inspected my dwelling, which I had not had the energy to look over the night before, and confirmed my feeling of satisfaction at my situation. Indeed, it was perfect. The kitchen was large and well supplied, the amenities modern and well ordered. There was a pleasant dining room, furnished with surprising taste, a formal drawing room, a sitting room adjacent to my bedroom upstairs, and an attractive breakfast parlor downstairs at the front of the house, which captured all the morning light. In this room stood an elegant mahogany writing desk, surely the best piece of furniture in the house. I immediately requisitioned the parlor for my work room; I had brought with me several projects which I hoped to complete in my time here, including the almost complete manuscript of poems which I have promised to S—. I thought of the lady who had inspired a good number of the poems; it was almost the anniversary of our first meeting. I confess to a moment's weakness as I remembered a certain gesture, a certain turn of her head which displayed the graceful curve of her neck, and for a while I toyed with the idea of dedicating the book to her (I need only use initials, after all), but I discarded the notion almost immediately, since it would be taken as proof of an ardor which for me has now grown cold and which I have no wish to revisit.

After noon I found myself restless and spent some time in the kitchen speaking to Anna, as I was more and more curious about the history of this house, which was so atypical of the dwellings I had seen in the Plateau. She told me that its owner, who was known only as Damek, lived not far away, less than two miles' walk.

"Well, then!" I said. "I should, as a dutiful tenant, pay him my respects!"

"I fear, sir, that he might be from home," cried Anna with what seemed to me a certain confusion.

"It would only be courteous," said I. "And if he is not home,

I have wasted no more than my time. I feel as if I should enjoy a walk."

"I think, sir, that the weather will turn later," Anna answered. "A storm can blow down from the mountains in a trice, and with a savageness as you lowlanders are not used to. And even if it is but a short distance, storms are no pleasure to walk in."

She looked as if she might say more, but instead turned to her cooking. My curiosity was piqued by this exchange; I felt that Anna was concealing something from me. I stepped outside to sniff the air and saw that the skies were clear and blue and showed no sign of unrest. So it was that a short time later, despite further attempts at dissuasion from Anna, I left the house, armed with meticulous directions (and checking that my silver ring was still on my finger, in case of unexpected meetings with Plateau wizards or the like). I found myself following a path that was little more than a goat track, which wound its way through scrubby fields of cabbages and barley in the direction of the Black Mountains.

I passed around a dozen sad memorials — the crumbling cairns of stones that signified where some luckless man had met his death — which seemed excessive for such a humble goat path. Then I remembered that my friend had told me that some two decades before, Elbasa had been under vendetta. "Vendetta can go on for generations," he said. "But in this case they found some way to stop it before it killed every man in the village."

It was, at first, as pleasant a stroll as I had anticipated, but as I neared my destination, I began to realize that my housekeeper's warning had been well founded. The temperature fell abruptly, the wind began to gust in uneasy jumps and startles, and I saw to my alarm an ominous bank of purple cloud devouring the sky with an astonishing rapidity. I wrapped my coat closer around me and hurried on, keeping an anxious eye

out for the house which, according to my directions, should soon appear to my left. It was with some relief that I spotted a gleam of light in the gathering darkness of the storm — it was only midafternoon, and yet the sun had all been eaten up, so that it almost seemed like night — and hurrying on, I found myself at the doorway of a large farmhouse just as the first drops of rain began to fall.

No one answered my initial knock. Puzzled, I tried again, growing concerned because the rain now began to pour down in earnest, liberally interspersed with hail. I thought that perhaps the deafening thunder drowned my knocking, and persisted, and after some minutes began to shout as well, but although there was a light in an upper window, indicating that the house was by no means empty, the door remained resolutely shut. At last I gave up and, shaking the water out of my eyes, started looking around for some rude shelter; perhaps the storm would pass quickly and I could make my luckless way home. There were, I saw, a couple of outbuildings, but more promisingly, I saw that at the back of the house there was a small courtyard. Perhaps this man Damek — if he was at home — was at that end of the house and simply had not heard me through the din of the storm. The gate was locked, but when I clambered to the top of the wall, I saw a window, and through the window, flickering against the wall, the reflected flames of a huge hearth.

By now I was soaked through and freezing — seduced by the pleasant morning, I had worn only a light coat — and forgetting how loud the storm was, I was possessed by an irrational rage, that anyone could have such lack of fellow feeling that they could leave a traveler unanswered by their door — and in such weather! And in the high country, where one's duty to a guest was sacred, a matter of honor, of life and death itself! Standing on an old water butt, I hefted myself over the wall and scrambled into the dark courtyard.

As soon as I dropped to the ground, I realized I had made a grave mistake: a very hound of hell, which had hitherto remained silent, rushed out of the shadows, barking fit to wake the dead. Had I not plunged forward in a blind panic for the door, it would have torn out my throat; even so, the brute attacked my leg, inflicting a most painful bite. I should have been done for had the back door been locked, but to my great good fortune, it was not, and I and the snarling dog tumbled in a wet, graceless heap into the middle of a huge kitchen.

Somebody pulled the hound off me, but not before it had bitten me once more, and drove the animal out of the door with a stick. I sat on the floor gasping for breath, recovering from the shock of the attack, and it was a little while before I realized that I was crouched ignominiously on the floor, clutching my bleeding calf. A powerfully built, black-browed man in shirtsleeves, clearly a servant, was standing above me, regarding me with no great friendship in his face.

“Who the hell are you?” he demanded.

I attempted to draw together some poor shreds of what remained of my dignity.

“My name is Hammel,” I said, trying to ignore the pain of my wounds and examining my trousers, which were sadly stained with blood. “I sought to pay my courtesies to my landlord and find myself rewarded in this poor fashion. I knocked on the front door, but no one answered, and in desperation to escape the storm, thought I would try the back. . . .”

The man sneered and turned away without speaking, and my anger, fanned by my recent fright, reignited.

“Even if your master is away from home, it is no excuse to show such poor hospitality!” I said. “You disgrace his name. You can be sure that report will reach him, you cur. I’ll see that he has you whipped.”

The man turned back to face me, and to my astonishment

I saw that an infernal laughter flickered in his eyes. "And what of your manners, tumbling in here uninvited and messing up my floor?"

My breath was quite taken away by his insolence, and I sat there, gaping like a fish. But now he squatted down and, without further reference to me, examined my leg. He grunted.

"You're lucky," he said, standing up again. "Percha might have had your throat. But that's scarce a scratch; you'll live." He opened a cupboard and found a rag, then poured some water from a jug into a basin and handed them to me. "Here, clean yourself up."

I took the items in a daze, still astounded by his rudeness. At last I found my tongue again. "Did you hear what I said, you dog? Your master will hear of this!"

"And whom, pray, are you calling 'dog'?" The amusement had vanished from his face altogether, and I began to feel afraid of him. He regarded me steadily for a few moments.

"I suppose," he said, "that it is not a mortal offense to be a fool, even if it ought to be. I expect you are my tenant; you look vapid enough. I had no desire or need to meet you, and I wish you would go home. Sadly, that is impossible at present, since this storm will not pass before the night is over. But since you have come to pay me your respects, I would suggest that it is inadvisable to call me names."

So this man, whom I had taken for a rough servant, was in fact Mr. Damek, my landlord! Or was it some monstrous joke? What was the master of the house doing in the kitchen, dressed like a peasant? I thought better of arguing; a sudden uncomfortable image of the many cairns I had seen in my walk earlier that day passed before my inner eye.

I stuttered an apology, but the man merely gave me a look of contempt and told me to get off the floor. He returned to the table, where he had been cleaning a rifle before I had interrupted

his task, and ignored me completely. Shakily, I stood and found a seat, as far away from my host as possible but close enough to the fire to dry myself off. I cleaned my wounds, which smarted badly, bitterly regretting my hasty decision that morning. I resolved to listen to Anna in the future; it promised to be a long, uncomfortable, and unamusing night.

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"In language and pitch, the pastiche is spot on... Devotees of Brontë's original work will still enjoy Croggon's amplification of the story's supernatural elements." —*Publishers Weekly*

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