

Rambling Roze

Wezulind likes the velvet feel of the cover of her book as her fingers brush the binding of soft black skin. 'Mr Vuplin' she writes in her clear but somewhat uneducated hand. Mr Vuplin' she writes in her favourite red-as-blood ink: 'Mr Vuplin took much to drink this year.'

Mr Murchen the Keeper saw the frost turn to fire in the spring sun, the woods transformed by the subtle thaw. Snail slime trails lay thick on the fallen branches as he rode his old roan nag on the twisting track through wood and mist, out to toad-flax field to pull the mandrake grown and sealed in corpse's seed. In those fields where the tall gold corn waved at harvest tide, a few green shoots were poking through. The margins grown with thorny weed, awaiting the May-time waves of scarlet thunder- flowers. The adders are still mostly coiled asleep beneath the walls dry-stones, fitfully dreaming of summer-fattened molluscs, sometimes emerging to bask when the infrequent April sun gives them enough warmth. He rides around those twisty brides-paths through bramble patch and around mires and swampy ground. In the moonlight of St Marks Eve, there is supposedly a straight road through the woods, but even in the weak spring sun, it's lost in the stands of the coppice and straggle of the trees. As he told the Sergeant later, he saw the Rambling Man then. He was all wrapped up in his waterproofs against the vagaries and whims of the English spring.

The Rambling Man came striding up the old winding path through the woods down by the twisted ash and met pretty Wezulind sat on the outcrop of Inferior Oolitic limestone past Drake's Copse near the Scaffold Butt. He was dressed all in Rambling Gear, wrapped in the latest Glow-Techs™ trekking clothes, purchased at great expense in a London Emporium. He's protected in his plastic coating against the narrow provincial rains and spring soakers blowing in from the scarp-top. He's got some dead smart boots too: engineered, not cobbled, but engineered you hear, like a battleship or engine might be, Engineered to resist frost and ice and mud and stone, makes me wonder will the delusion never cease; as if anything can resist the slow grinding of time. Those old folks built towers to heaven and tempers to hell but do you see them here? Whatever they did back who-knows-when, weather and rain have undone it again, reduced it all to fine grey dust and good black soil.

You know all about those rocks of the Middle Jurassic, deposited in the shallows of some warm primeval sea, it's a local landmark, has been since before the Empire spread its tentacles out to the Coomb in Nazworth Woods. The wind and rain have carved it into the face of an ancient king; that old King looking down for a thousand springs on the May-wake picnic and celebration. Those stone-dead shells milled to flour and moulded by the elements into the King's broad and noble forehead, then wrinkled and riven with little narrow trickles sprung from the aquifers and overflowing streams. Above his broad and noble forehead he is crowned with fossil cockles and urchins all a-dead a-dead oh.

"Nice coat" says Wezulind from a shallow cave in the stone.

The Rambling man replies:

This is not a coat; this is a high performance shell.

This is not just fabric, this is polymolecular laminate.

This fabulous chemistry, selectively permeable.

This membrane of a billion microscopic pores.

A fortress forged by science.

Against water and foul wet rain,.
This osmotic wick, which keeps me free of moisture.
This multi-layered garment.
Which serves me as a stylish covering.
And that keeps the cold at bay.
This envy of less wealthy walkers.
This blessed outerwear, this anorak, this technological triumph, this is
the Glow-Techs™ Rambler.

“How’s it do in the mist?” Wezulind asks.

“Not so well” he replies looking suddenly sad.

“Still it looks like it’ll keep you warm when the sun burns out in the wolf’s-mouth winter months “.

“It is the most remarkable fabric, what are you doing in there?”.

“Getting my Mouldwarping stuff; we’re coming to the end of the Easter month” says Wezulind.

“Mouldwarp?”

“He is the horror that comes when the earth bursts in to life again with the tide of primroses flowing over the mossy banks.” Says Wezulind.

“It is the time when the old Mouldwarp, dressed in his black velvet and bearing his terrible claws leads his foul brood ravishing and despoiling the crops. Leads them out to pile the earth on the fallow-fields and disturb the vegetable gardens and grassy verges in search of fat wriggling worms.” says Wezulind her mouth smiling, bright from never having eaten neither sweet nor swede nor sugar nor fruit. Her teeth smiling all their sharpness at him.

“They’ll pay me well to hunt them. To spear, bite, skewer, break, twist, disembowel and spike him, to tear, shred, poison and damage him, to skin him and pour boiling water on his brain pan till he’s dead as dead” She adds.

He shudders and mutters “barbarity”

Then gazes in puppy-like wonder at this Wezulind who he takes for a beautiful country girl with her blood soaked small talk and long red hair.

The wind must have been blowing from behind because he didn’t catch her scent, not that its unpleasant you understand, I wouldn’t be unkind and say that, just very very natural, predatory if you like. So she’s sitting there on Old King Rock amongst the shade loving hart’s-tongue ferns. Nestled in the dark greenery. Well, who could resist her as she moves in resonance with the waving branches and quivering tall grass. The agile and snaky grace of that long thin form, together with that wild mass of deep-red curls flowing down her shoulders and swirling round her head.

He’s lost.

“Tell me the way to Nazworth sweet Wezulind” he says (well, actually he calls her Roze as this is the name that Wezulind has given). It could be her name or have once been her name or might one day be her name when she settles down. She could be Roze with that autumn tinted–hair and those cherry-red lips. It still could be her name in certain lights and moods, when at rest for instance among the greenery. But this would be but camouflage. For if you see her running on those hilltops, chasing down the hare or dibbing for the mouldwarps in the veggie plots, you’d see she was some wild creature: twisting, dancing and running on the caterwauling wind. Her hair all flowing fire and her lips red like blood then you should know she is the Wezulind not the Roze.

Up comes the Rambling Man so close he should scent her, but somehow doesn’t “are you not scared you’ll tread on an adder?” (Her feet are bare).

“Oh no, snakes keep well away from I, they fear your Roze’s thorn” (Wezulind’s that is).

'Does Wezulind,' wonders Mr Murchen the Keeper who is checking his traps in a nearby coppice, set there to keep the vicious invading mink away from his pheasants, 'Does Wezulind' he wonders 'smell sweeter by this name?'

She has such a long, slender body, perhaps she was born with more vertebrae than usual. Her head is a little too flat, but her narrow face is sculpted over bone as fine and strong as silver filigree. She has sharp claws, a match even for the mouldwarp, she would use them too if you would offend her. In the summer, Wezulind dresses in browns like a poacher to hide better in the scrub and low thorn-wood. In the winter she slips on a coat is of white fur to keep her warm hunting the snowy hare.

Wezulind had been hunting today. Hunting spring hares in the valley called the Lays on Fateful Hill with a view to baking pies for the May-wake.

"I have studied" says the Rambling Man in his 3 in 1 jacket eyeing the brace hanging there "the Hare in folk custom and mythology, is it not bad luck to kill it?"

"For any but your Roze (Wezulind); the Hare is my natural joy."

"You know there are good grounds for believing that the sacredness of this animal reaches back into an age before the Romans, it was probably a very important part of the great Spring Festival of the prehistoric inhabitants of this island".

"And so he still is" says Wezulind-Roze.

Steadily cantering along the Drake's Copse path comes Mr Murchen, the woods around him so silent he thinks the stars have returned to the place of their birth in the misty solitudes among those old creepy trunks. In the forties, when he was just the keeper's lad, he'd see old Brigadier-General LBJ Cowling charging with an ancient cavalry lance through these woods with gold braids won in the last century flying behind as he rode down poachers and foxes. So quiet now, he wonders where the Brigadier buried the bodies. He haexpects Mr Vuplin would know. Hardly seems a working wood at all nowadays. He canters out onto the bride-path, the old roan sure footed after twenty years of working these woods, enjoying the exercise in the spring air, frisky like she was a foal again. The roan rears as he tugs the reins, reeling her in from her excited run. He pats the warm neck and swings his body down from the stirrups, leaving the horse tied by the liche gate. He comes upon Old Mr Vuplin sleeping by the Cruck door, Mr Vuplin says he's been the Cruck-warder Seventy years and if he likes he can kip under that fine Romanesque arch of the local quarryings so admired by Mr Pevsner in his catalogue of antique buildings. It was always included in the itineraries of peripatetic parsons on cycling holidays of the area.

"Why Mr Vuplin" they would say "That is a fine Norman arch, you must be very proud".

Mr Vuplin would agree and draw their attention to the pagan inscriptions on the lower stones.

"You see Parson, the Witchies used to live in this here coomb, dreadful wicked they were, but our ancestors were followers of the new god" he would say. He would tell 'em that with their faith in the new god they smote the pagan and this, the site of the Witchies unholy temper., here they raised this fine arch to the glory of the lord.

Of course he knows that ain't true, the Witchies retreated to the caves and burrows in the barrows and into the great green woods years before they built the church, maybe it was even them that donated the stones, them being friends and cousins and godparents to the village-folks.

The Parsons though, they might think him a bit touched but admire his fervour and zealotry and so give him a decent tip and then perhaps move on to appreciate the sculpted tomb raised over the remains of some Saracen-slain knight buried in the chancel. Mr Pevsner calls the tomb 'Norman' and says it's 'nicely spaced with the knight at rest on a flat tomb chest under a thankfully tall canopy'.

The poor knight has suffered; Hacked down by Saracens, his body boiled to the bone for transportation back home, then his name that should have lived on in glory carelessly forgotten. Time has ground him in its teeth until his face has worn down to a ghostly cipher, but there, carved on the tomb, the parsons find the warning (Which in Mr Pevsner's Guide he finds explained as 'local yarning, the carving actually added by a romantic Victorian restorer').

Neither poppy, nor mandrakes drowsy syrup take.
To still the motion of time, forever this medicine will stay your eye.
Till the day the Fiddler under the hill shall wake.
You will be caught in yesterday amongst the lush May blooms.
That grow in the gallows grove beneath the silk-draped spiders-loom.

None the less it gives them a good shudder, there in the church in the immemorial stone built village just lighting up the lanterns. Set in that quiet coomb where glow-worms speckle the night and with its round barrows surrounded by the silent woods rising up to the head of the fateful hill rearing up into the darkening sky like the silhouette of some pagan titan. They make sure they stick to the winding roads not cut through the trees on the way back.

"You'll be safe enough on the bride-paths" says Mr Vuplin to them "Those brides-paths in the woods come from the old homesteads. They made 'em deliberately meandering and cursive. Just to make sure the brides couldn't be followed by the dead and the devil, who as you know being parsons, move only in straight lines. Just keep off the Cruck-roads" he'd say "they ain't safe 'til you're bishops".

It's a warning everyone hears from him, the older he grows the more urgent it becomes. "It's the Eve of St Mark, when the Old Ones in the Grove come down to visit their descendants praying for their pagan souls in St George's Cruck." He says "Hey Wezulind, you be sure to keep off the strait paths tonight".

"Why Mr Vuplin?"

"Don't you know about the Lykewage path in the lore and history written here in blood of cockerel on blackened page. Now I know many paths have disappeared, while others that persist have lost their old purpose. But don't tell me you never heard warnings from your granny not to walk the Lykewage path on the eve of Saint Mark or Hallowe'en, or the eves of New Year, Midsummer, or Christmas? Keep off the Cruck-way paths Wezulind".

Wezulind says, "I'll be your guide", then asks "where we going Rambling Man? Ain't it getting seasonal tonight, we should keep close in the snug".

"The thin spring wind does not bother me sweet Roze. This garment is ideal for England's changeable weather conditions. Why there's a straight road through the wood" he says spying it in the light of the rising moon, "shall we follow it to that Church over the hill?"

"They don't like me there much, I'll see you in the back bar at the Horse later on" she says.

Coming back from buying a few jugs of cider on St Mark's Eve, Murchen saw her coming down the Lykewage. She had the wild bluebells in her hand and she was pale in the moonlight. Her feet seemed to make no sound as she trod upon the fallen leaves grown dry, skeletal, membranous, and fine in the six months of spring and winter frosts.

And she sang.

Wherefore, adieu, my own heart true!
None other rede I can:
For I must to the green wood go.
Alone, a banished man.

“What you done with the Rambler, Wezulind?” he asks.

“Nothing, he went up the path to Bellham, thought he’d like to see the Church, I want my tea and came down through the wood”.

“It’s St Mark’s Eve Wezulind, stay off the Lykewage path, Mr Vuplin says there’s others that will want to use them”.

“As you know Mr Murchen” says Vuplin, “If the spirits of those interred below were minded to travel between two places. Just assuming for a moment there are such things as spectres and you were minded to believe in them. Those ghosts would want to fly along on a direct course close to the ground, so they’d take a straight line connecting the two places kept clear of fences, walls, and buildings to avoid being obstructed. See how it runs in a straight line over mountains and valleys and through marshes. In towns it sometimes passes close on the old houses and goes right through the new ones. “.

“Were I not born in this Coomb I might be minded not to believe you”.

“But you were”.

“And I do”.

Old Mr Vuplin is sitting-up. Waiting for the time between eleven and one of the clock at the Cruck door, Mr Murchen is keeping him company for the eve, a bottle of cider or two between them (or maybe each) to keep them jolly and some nice sandwiches made by Mrs Murchen.

“Them parsons would have a fit if they knew about the vault, Mr Vuplin”.

“Well they don’t and no-ones going to show ‘em. Even that Mr Pevsner never found it”.

“Well it’d never do them being Christians like, to find the Temper of the Witchies with Old King Nod tucked up with his stone dogs under the old Cruck.”

“Well so are we, Good Christians like”.

“But old believers too”.

“It’s a shame, they have no purpose for old King Nod in their teleology, no end of him in their eschatology, and their demonology missed him completely. He was a good God to have around while he lasted, you can tell the rocks and stones remember him; on still summer evenings, you can hear his dreams dancing through the woods.”

A fine spring mist is rising in the graveyard, thicker at the lych-gate (where the cortège enters the Cruckyard), and along the nearby Bellham Lane (presumably an old corpse road),.

“Look Mr Murchen” says Vuplin.

“Now you know even a bath tub of cider won’t give me the sight, remember when I was up the maypole polishing the cockerel ready for the May-wake. Up on the top of the Fatefull Hill keeping watch over the valley. His metal tail is aglow in the moonlight and he’s vibrating in the breeze. I swear the centurion cockerel is singing to the moons pale face looking up at him from the black-mirror river. His voice has grown soft from having sung the long centuries away, worn to a mere whisper in the warm summer wind. You

can say I was drunk, so drunk I heard the Badon Cock'trice crowing an ancient drinking song. But what you say you saw...

"It were just the old Kings turning in their sleep, dreaming of the days that their verdigris swords were alive with crimson blood and bright with amber fire".

"Tell me who do you see coming down the Lykewage?"

"One of them old kings with a maggoty head like a ripe cheese and a hat resembling the cap of The Fateful Hill worn on his bald skull, can't you see any of him?"

"No, and I don't think I really want to, to tell the truth I'm glad I ain't the seer".

That's why Mr Vuplin the Cruck-warden waits under that fine Romanesque arch of the local quarryings on St Marks Eve. He waits for the wraiths of the dead and the wraiths of the doomed, but still living, to come to the inner eye of the seer all in a procession coming in from beyond the Cruckyard and passing into the Cruck, and then returning back to their graves. On St Marks Eve he sits there so as to note down in the Cruck records and prepare the burial ground for those that will die this year.

Later, walking up that firefly road through the chainsaw-thinned edge of beech woods by Fiddler's Quarry Mr Murchen the Keeper swore he heard something scratching and hatching in the tumulus soil and ran the last mile home.

Some days later in 'the Horse', settled in the public bar the Sergeant is pursuing an inquiry, not being nosy of course, but interested in a friendly way, over a pint or two, listening, more than asking.

He overhears Mr Murchen the Keeper speaking to Mr Vuplin the Warden who swears he saw Wezulind on that road at Eastertide says he saw Wezulind walking it in a moonbeam hand in hand with a stranger going on up the Lykewage, the old straight road through the woods.

'Bout nine o'clock in the evening Sergeant he says when the Sergeant places a couple of pints of best cider on the table and asks him when they last saw the Rambling Man with Wezulind.

"Was they making hay?" Asks the Sergeant putting down his own pint (of IPA as he's on duty) and taking out a notebook.

"What Wezulind? Wouldn't think so her being what she is" says Old Mr Vuplin. "What I can't fathom is what was she doing on the Lykewage. Don't she know its other names? The bier road, burial way or the coffin line? That Wezulind she don't bear the ancestors in mind."

The sergeant, out of curiosity, buys Mr Vuplin another drink to loosen his tongue and lubricate his memory and Mr Vuplin continues, well oiled.

"The Witchies, them old ones under the whirling green still use it mind but Wezulind don't like the woods much, don't know them like she knows the fields and farms. She likes the open top of the scarp and the broad green naked hills".

Mr Vuplin knocks back his pint in a single gulp and looks mournful into its vacant depths wondering at its loss.

"So what's she doing taking the old road past the monstrous trees of the inner-woods never felled for timber or cropped for coppice but growing free and wilful as they did when the Witchies first came".

The sergeant closes his ears to this, he don't want to know about what these folk get up to among themselves, don't want to know about them secret ones, nor about no whirlings in the woods.

Mr Murchen butts in "Never mind Wezulind, Wezulind keeps her own time, not ours, I can never fathom the girl out any hour day and night, but she won't harm nothing bigger than a Hare".

“But Murchen, I saw him again, he was coming back down the Lykewage all alone, at midnight to visit Wezulind. But first passed the wild men all gurning and somersaulting with sharp stone spears and ragged hides. Then the Romano-Britains, noble but hairy you’ll find, the Witchies of course bearing the sacred cauldron. After them the Norman knight buried in the chancel rode by, can’t say as I remember his face though, even old Brigadier-General LBJ Cowling came down as strict and wizened dry as the day I nailed him in his coffin back in 55.”

“Less of those tourist talks if you please Mr Vuplin” says the sergeant, “I’ve got a missing writer to find, the TLS are breathing down my neck and the London Review of Books are considering an unfavourable article on the matter. The Chief Constable himself may take charge of the case if it can’t be amicably resolved”.

“The Rambling Man was a writer?”.

“Not just any old writer as might disappear in the woods unremarked upon and unnoticed by those outside literary circles, he was celebrated, a modern Mr Pevsner, in that he wrote his philosophical thoughts and aesthetic sensation of the landscape for popular consumption in the mass market. “You listen Mr Vuplin” says the Sergeant “He is also well known to the non-reading public. A noted celebrity gives talks on the countryside on telly, in fact owing to his featuring of a famous brand of outdoor clothing in his literary publications, to the world at large your Rambling Man is the face of Glow-Techs™ so you tell me what you saw.

“Well” says Mr Vuplin,

“They all paid respect as they entered the Cruck as they do every year on the Eve of Saint Mark and I sat and watched for the future additions preceding themselves if you like.

Back out into the dark they went except one lost soul. It was so hazy, so insubstantial, so lacking in presence I had to lean right up to it. As I did so I heard a dry whisper: a dry whisper in a dead throat, it said to me “why am I here? Why did they bring me, where is Roze”.

“You didn’t happen to find a dead-straight path in the woods did you?” I asked.

“I found a short cut, not marked on the map” said the phantom “and a party of ramblers were heading off down it”.

“Were they oddly dressed at all” I asked.

“Very odd, I was trying to persuade them that they should invest in Glow-Techs™ outdoor clothing, its no use Rambling in fancy dress”.

“I am afraid you hooked up with the dead”.

“But I’m alive” it said and this wraith grasped me by the wrist, its touch like frost yet clammy upon my flesh and you know its winding sheet was made of plastic stuff.

“Just look at yourself” I said.

And it raised its ghostly arm and groaned and faded into the walls grey stone with just a whispered “Roze”.

“You are much respected in the area, Mr Vuplin a pillar of the community,” says the Sergeant, “a churchwarden how long? Known for the veracity and truth of your speech? I think I have transposed your account here, if you would read and sign and then perhaps I can buy you another pint or two?”

The Statement reads: ‘I never saw nothing unusual on St Marks Eve.’

“That’s right I suppose” says Vuplin, “I saw no wraiths of those who will die in the coming year. Good news indeed, we will rejoice at the May-wake.”

What he didn’t mention though was maybe, although there were no more wraiths of the dead and tomb-doomed, he thought he heard a familiar voice. Just maybe he heard that old voice in the spring wind whisper, just a sourceless echo in the dark addressing its message to him alone: it announced its presence with the words “Times up, ‘tis yourself”.

‘Mr Vuplin’ Wezulind writes in her moleskin diary ‘took much to drink this year’.

Oliver Smith 2012