

KAI OF THE RAVENS

Chapter 1. Shadow in the Well

Sometimes things are just wrong. You don't know why, or even what it is. There's nothing you can point to and say, that's the problem. But they're wrong. Like everybody's unhappy, but nobody's talking about it. Your family argue all the time and your friends annoy you. All the things you enjoy get spoiled. Even your favourite food tastes muddy.

That's how it was before I met Geronwy.

I'd been ill for ages. Sometimes I was really ill with fevers and things, but mostly I just felt like rubbish and had no energy, so I hung around in my bedroom. I don't have a tv or a computer there, because screens give me headaches, but Dad gets me loads of books and when I was well enough I sat and read for hours. I read loads about the Celts, who used to live round here, and left their marks everywhere if you know how to look for them. But when I was tired I just lay on my bed and stared at the ceiling.

My ceiling hasn't been painted for ages and it's got old plaster with loads of cracks in it, that have been filled and then cracked again, and stains from where a pipe leaked. On bad days when my legs ached and my head was dizzy, I used to lie looking at it endlessly, picking out faces and trees and mountains. There were whole landscapes in that ceiling. Then one day I wasn't looking at it any more. I was in it.

I was on a path. A white path, leading through trees swaying and rustling in the breeze. Beyond, a line of mountains rose to a single jagged peak. I was walking down the path, in big strides, and I wasn't ill any more. Instead of being tired and heavy, I was light and full of energy. I started to run, and it was so easy. Soon I was out of the trees and jumping up rocks into the mountains. Far above me, near the peak, there was a puff of smoke. If I climbed high enough I'd find where that puff of smoke came from, and it would be a dragon's lair, and I'd fight the dragon and kill it.

Then I looked back and for the first time ever, I glimpsed the Beast - a creature like a blot of darkness that melted into the trees as I caught sight of it. I knew what it was immediately, as if I'd always known it. It was stalking me and it would always be there, wherever I went, a little way

behind me. It scared me, but I liked being scared. It made me feel more alive.

After that first time I kept going back and exploring. I scrambled over the rocky outcrops of the foothills and found magical valleys with singing birds and flowers. And however rubbish I felt in my normal life, I always felt strong and alive there.

But the day I met Geronwy, there was something different.

I was in my room as usual, and I could hear Fiona playing downstairs. She's my little sister. She's only two, but she always has too much energy, just like I have too little. Mum was clattering around doing the washing up. Dad was out at work. Everything sounded normal. I was bored with the Celts, so I lay down on my bed and looked upwards.

In a moment I was on the path, with the mountains rising ahead. But instead of running down it I stopped where I was, because a net was hung between the trees in front of me. And caught in it was a little devil, grey as dust, with horns and wings and deep sunken eyes. It stared at me. It had a really nasty look.

“What do you want?” I said

“You.” It didn't move its lips or shift its stare, but it spoke very clearly. “You. At the Well. Now.”

I didn't know what it was talking about, but it gave me a weird feeling in my tummy. I was sure that devil had been sent for me, to fly up my nostril and eat its way into my soul. Only the net had saved me.

Mum came in just then. I shut my eyes and came back into the room.

“Are you all right Kai?” she asked.

Her voice sounded stressed. I didn't want to talk to her. I rolled over to face the wall.

“Yeah,” I grunted.

She sat down on my bed, put a hand on my shoulder and sighed.

“I've got to get Fi out of the house. She's driving me mad. I'll take her down the park. Will you be all right on your own for a bit?”

Before I could answer there was a big bump and then a shriek from the stairs. Fiona, falling down them. She was always bumping herself.

Mum rushed off.

A bit later they went out and the house was quiet.

Nobody's ever really found out what my illness is. Dr Byrne says it's Glandular Fever which keeps coming back, but other people say it's M.E.. My dad thinks it's all in my head.

Anyway, some days I can hardly move and others I feel fairly normal, but I never know which it's going to be.

I got up and went downstairs. I was still a bit shaky from the little devil, but otherwise I felt all right. I got some orange juice from the fridge and then I wanted something to eat – a biscuit or some chocolate or something, but there wasn't anything. Mum's started hiding stuff because she thinks I'm getting overweight. Which I suppose I am. I really wanted something though, I was desperate, and finally I found 50p in a drawer. I picked it up. Mum wouldn't miss it, she didn't even know it was there. If only I could just get into town, I could buy myself some sweets....

To town? Why not? I could do it. I hadn't walked into town for ages, but it wasn't far, and anyway if I felt tired I could always turn back.

The sun was bright. I hadn't been outside for a few days and I was surprised how hot it was. A jackdaw sitting on the thorn tree cocked its head at me. It had a funny look about it, almost human, but I didn't take much notice.

I headed on down the street, but already I wasn't feeling too well. A car whizzed past me, going much too fast for our road, which is a back street. It left a smell of diesel. Then at the main road cars were roaring up the hill; my legs were going wobbly, and my head was fuzzy. But I didn't turn back, because I still wanted some sweets. I crossed it and headed on into town.

It was getting worse though – cars everywhere, and the noise and fumes were getting to me. Without even thinking, I turned into one of the narrow alleys in the old part of town, where cars can't go. It was further this way, but at least it was quiet....

It was too quiet. Where were all the people? I hadn't seen anybody since I left the house, only cars, and now there was nothing, just the walls of the alleyway hemming me in. The fuzziness had turned to a throbbing, and everything felt like a dream. I was probably getting ill again, but it was too late to turn back. I stumbled on, hardly knowing where I was, but heading down the hill because it was easier. On either side of me were high stone walls clumped with moss and ferns. I'd been here before, but I couldn't quite remember when, and it didn't matter anyway. If only I could find somewhere to sit down....

And then I turned a corner and saw the well: The Old Well of Gara. It's quite famous in a way. I remembered it now. I'd come here with my school once, and messed around in the pools while our teacher told us how it used to be a Holy Well, and lepers came there to be cured. You can see through an iron grille to a little cave where the water bubbles out of the hill. Then it flows out through a spout into a cobbled area with stone ledges and three ancient troughs, which all have special names: The Snake, the Toad and the Long Crippler.

I was done in, but at least I knew where I was. I collapsed onto a ledge and leant back

against the wall.

When I'd got my breath back, I started to look around. It didn't look like a Holy Well any more. It looked a mess. Some scrappy bits of ribbon were tied round the grille, but the troughs were full of litter and dead leaves, and there was a lump of dog poo in one corner.

Suddenly I remembered the little devil on the ceiling: "You. At the Well. Now." And here I was, without even meaning to. Creepy.

I picked up a stick and started stirring the leaves in the Long Crippler. I could feel something in there... With a jerk of the stick I pulled it up to the surface.

A dead frog.

I stared at it. It was disgusting - the bloated green corpse, the bulging, black, lifeless eyes.

And then I shivered. It was like a shadow came out of the pool of dark water in the cave and passed over me. But that wasn't all, because at the same time the sky was blotted out and a thick fog was billowing around me.

There was something weird about that fog. One moment it had been a summer's day and the next I could hardly see the wall through the murk. I tried to tell myself it was just a sea mist that had drifted up from the estuary, but I knew it couldn't have been. I dropped the frog and tried to get up. My legs were weak and I was panting with the effort, but I forced myself. I tried to take a step forward, but I couldn't - my legs just wouldn't move. Everything was spookily silent, except the trickling water which sounded like a witch's cackle calling out my name: "Kai!" And now something was oozing out of the well, a shadow deeper than the fog, wrapping its coldness round my feet so that I thought I was going to faint.

Then I heard a yapping through the mist. There was something good about that yapping, something I liked immediately. A moment later I could make out a small brown dog with one floppy ear, jumping up and down and wagging its tail in front of me.

"Come on!" he grunted. "This way."

Dogs can't talk, except in picture books and dreams, so I didn't believe what I was hearing. I thought I was making it up because I was ill.

"Get on with it! Follow me!" it grunted again, then started to move off into the fog. It was going to disappear and leave me there. I didn't care whether it was really talking or not. I knew somehow it was on my side, and I didn't want it to leave me.

"Wait!" I shouted, and took a step forward. And that one step broke whatever was holding me. I was free of the shadow and started to run. I don't know how. I just ran, like I hadn't for ages, on down the path through the fog. My feet hardly even touched the ground. I didn't know where I was going and I didn't care, as long as I was getting away from the Well. The dog was bounding in front of me, turning its head occasionally and yapping encouragement.

Suddenly we came out onto the High Street.

It definitely was the High Street. Mrs Cranch's sweet shop was opposite, the lights in its window glowing through the fog. But it wasn't the same as usual. There were no people for a start, and there's always people on the High Street, even when the weather's bad. Only cars, one after another, screeching out of the fog, and roaring too fast down the hill with their lights blazing.

There was something else too - a round stone tower, looming above the sweet shop. I'd never seen that before. And a small green door in the wall between the sweetshop and the bank. That hadn't been there last time I came this way either.

The dog was already on the other side of the road, yapping at me to follow. Behind it I could see jars of sweets in Mrs Cranch's window. They looked friendly, those jars. I fixed my eyes on them, waited for a lull in the traffic, and stepped forward into the road. But I shouldn't have stopped at all, because my legs had gone wobbly again and I could hardly move.

The dog was yapping at me. I could do it. I had to.

I took one pace forward, then another, but I felt like I was going to faint. The fog swirled about me in a thick soup, so I couldn't even see the other side of the road any more.

Only big double headlights, bearing down on me.

I felt a huge rush of fear, and it got me going again. I couldn't run, it was more like swimming through jelly, but I was getting there. I was half way across. The dog was on the other side, jumping and barking.

Then the fog lifted and I saw the car: a big red 4-by-4 with bull-rails, spattered with mud. I was staring straight at the driver – a woman, with bright red lipstick and wearing dark glasses, in spite of the gloom. She'd seen me. She had to stop.

But she didn't stop. She speeded up. In front of me, the dog was yapping frantically.

“Come on!” it barked. “You can do it!”

I looked back at the car. It was almost on me. If it hit me I was going to die. With a last effort I hurled myself forwards.

My foot touched the pavement. And at the same moment the 4 by 4 screeched past me, an inch away, but the air was enough to hurl me forwards, face down onto the paving slabs.

Copyright: Patrick Cooper 2009