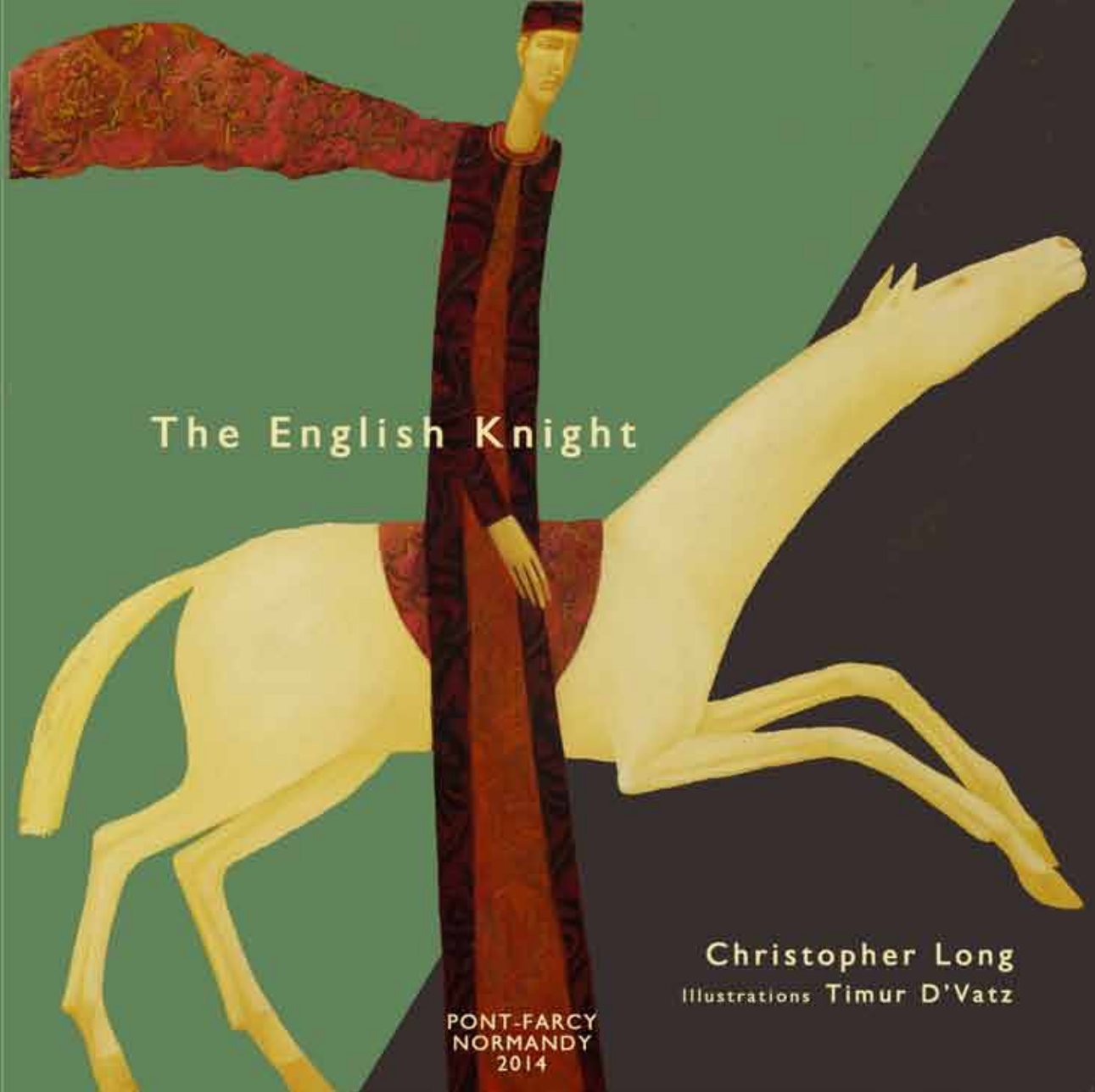
PONT-FARCY
NORMANDY
2014

# The English Knight



Christopher Long
Illustrations Timur D'Vatz

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# THE ENGLISH KNIGHT

*Short stories by*
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*illustrated by*
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*These stories describe a few of those moments when we find ourselves alone and vulnerable. They are dedicated to all those who recognise in any of them some part of themselves.*


Produced in Pont-Farcy, Normandy, France.

## INTRODUCING THE ENGLISH KNIGHT

"Are there things you wish to tell me?" the wise man asked.

"Yes, many things," replied the visitor, "but I haven't the courage or the words to express them."

"I see," said the wise man. "Then it seems we're both at a disadvantage."

"Really?" the visitor said. "In what way are you at a disadvantage?"

"Well, just as you cannot trust yourself to confide in me, I am now so old that I've become forgetful. For example, if you came to see me tomorrow I would almost certainly forget that you had come to see me today."

The visitor considered this carefully.

"So," he said, "if I came to see you tomorrow and told you about things that happened a very long time ago to someone that neither of us knows, you would never imagine that I might be talking about myself?"

"Precisely!" said the wise man. "But then of course if you were to come to my door tomorrow I might not remember you and I might not let you in."

The visitor considered this problem too for a while.

"Well, in that case," he said, "when I come tomorrow I will announce myself as... well... let me see... how about The English Knight?"

"The English Knight will be ideal," said the wise man. And they were both very pleased with themselves, until the visitor looked worried again.

"But how will you remember tomorrow that we agreed on The English Knight today?" he asked.

"Oh, don't you worry about that," the wise man replied. "I'm very wise indeed, especially when it comes to deciding what to remember and what to forget."

So, every day and for many days, The English Knight visited his wise friend and each time he would tell him a story. Some were amusing and some sad, most were quite ordinary and a few were rather disturbing.

## THE BOY WHO KNEW TOO LITTLE

Once in every life comes a defining moment which leaves its mark on us for ever more. For one small boy, the eldest son of his father's house, it came at the end of a banquet to celebrate his twelfth birthday.

In a great stone-floored, rush-strewn hall, beneath a massive hammer-beam roof, forty of his father's favoured friends sat feasting loudly and happily along both sides of a long oak table. But the boy, awaiting his fate at the far end, scarcely heard their laughter and shouted toasts.

Occasionally he glanced at the lines of faces lit by the flicker of candle-light, each with its looming shadow thrown against the walls by flaring tapers. Sometimes one of the many dogs lazing in front of the fire rose, stretched and wove a path through the cooks and their cauldrons to nuzzle his hand. But mostly he looked high above him where, in the glow of the fire, he could just see the doves roosting among the hams and strings of onions and bundles of herbs that hung awaiting winter among the rafters.

Suddenly there was a shout from the top of the table:

"Come forward, boy," his father commanded. "The time has come for us to hear what you have learned. You will tell us of your forebears and show us how you hope one day to match or even exceed their achievements."

Pale-faced and dressed only in a long white shirt, the boy stepped barefoot onto the table, helped by a bishop's chaplain on one side and a bearded knight's armourer on the other.

Looking straight ahead he walked the length of the table to the murmured encouragement of the guests who cleared a path for him among the remains of the feast.

Reaching the end, he bowed to his mother and father, kissed the purple stone on the bishop's outstretched hand and, shivering, turned to meet the expectant faces along the table and the figures of the cooks and attendants silhouetted in front of the fire. The silence was broken by the grating of unseen bolts and a door being opened.

From a far corner a steward emerged, leading forward the prettiest black colt the boy had ever seen. At first the creature

shied and side-stepped on the flag-stones but soon it settled quietly at the very spot where the boy himself had been sitting.

"If you have learned well the colt will be yours," he heard his mother say.

A servant with two flaming torches raised high above his head crossed the hall to stand in front of a great portrait of a figure in scarlet robes which hung between tapestries on the wall. Someone placed a heavy mantle over the boy's shoulders to keep out the cold as he half turned to face the picture. In a clear voice, he recited the story of the man and his many virtues and accomplishments. Then the torches progressed to the next painting.

And so it continued for almost an hour as the faces of twelve soldiers, sailors, statesmen, cardinals and councillors emerged from the gloom while one by one the boy explained their qualities and achievements. Finally he reached the last portrait, ending with the words:

"... he was a just man who knew well the laws of our land. He made them dutifully and applied them with wisdom and courage, without fear or favour, to all who came before him to seek remedies for their disputes. He served our king loyally and loved our mother church with faithful piety all his life and built for us who follow him this great house."

There was a rumble of approval from the table below him and the colt dipped its head. The trial was over and the boy turned nervously to his father. But from behind him came a voice:

"You have done well, my boy." The boy turned to face the bishop. "But answer me this: of all the faces before you, which should you most admire and most seek to emulate?"

The boy, unprepared for this, searched the now black walls for help.

"Perhaps the Quiet Knight?" he suggested uncertainly. "He was much loved and fought gallantly for freedom and gave his life for others."

A few voices from the table mumbled: "Good lad... Well said..." But there was silence from the top of the table. Then the bishop said:

"Really boy! And why not your mother and father? Do they not command your respect? Why do you not aspire to follow their example in all things?"

The boy turned briefly to glimpse the blank and disappointed faces of his parents, as distant now as pictures on a wall. Behind him he heard the clatter of hooves as the colt was turned and led away.

## THE KNIGHT'S GARDEN

Once, long ago, there lived a knight who owned many beautiful houses and estates which he, like other knights, visited from time to time.

And, like other knights, he had one burning, all-consuming passion in his life, the desire to create and possess the most beautiful garden in the whole world.

So the knight decided to ordain a sans-pareil of flowers and shrubs, rockeries and sunken gardens, complete with rivers, lakes and grottoes at the farthest-flung of all his estates, vying with his friends to make his the most wonderful of all.

For this he chose the most talented of his gardeners who listened carefully, excited and honoured that he had been chosen to undertake this great project, as the knight explained what he wanted and how this was to be a garden that would be remembered for all time.

"In ten years," said the knight, "I shall return to see what you have done."

So, for ten years the gardener worked, urging on his assistants to create the most beautiful garden in the world. For ten years they slaved through the cold of the winter and the heat of the summer, laying lawns, creating grottoes and filling lakes. They constructed bridges, built rockeries, planted trees and shrubs and sent all over the country, and to distant lands beyond, for the rarest, most exotic and most beautiful plants, shrubs and trees that could be found.

Slowly, as year followed year, the garden grew more beautiful, more mature and more certainly the most enchanting garden in the world.

Until finally the day approached when the knight was due to return and he, with his retinue, could just be seen far away on the horizon. Feverishly the men made their final preparations until the gardener, weary from all his work, surveyed the scene with quiet satisfaction and secret delight until... that is until, quite suddenly... a storm broke. A storm of unbelievable proportions.

A storm which tore through the gardens, lashing the trees, uprooting the shrubs, crushing the flowers and flooding the rivers which broke their banks, sweeping away the bridges and leaving a trail of

devastation and destruction in its wake.

All night it raged as the knight approached and when at last he arrived to see what had been done in his absence, he surveyed the scene before him.

And then he set off to find his gardener who was sitting under a rock, with tears in his eyes and despair etched into his face as surely as the wind and the rain had eroded the beauty of his garden.

"Well," said the knight, "why are you so sad?"

The gardener, unable to speak, simply surveyed the ruins of his work. And the knight, reading it all in the man's eyes, sat down beside his servant and for a long time said nothing as they shared the sight before them.

Then suddenly the knight stood up and said: "Come! I can see no reason for your despair."

And the gardener looked at him in disbelief.

"Beauty," said the knight, "is more than what we see, not something that even the most savage storm can destroy. So, considering the power of the storm and what still remains, I know I'm looking at what was, and what is, what I asked you to make: the most beautiful garden in the world."

## THE KNIGHT'S FORTRESS

Once there was a knight who lived in a sturdy fortress set on a high hill at the very centre of his beautiful domain.

Every day he would walk around the tall battlements inspecting the thick walls, the narrow loop-holes, the broad moat and the solid gate-house with its heavy iron draw-bridge.

Then he would climb to the top of the main tower where, beyond the pleasant meadows and thick forests, he could see to the furthest limits of his domain.

And it was the horizon that always worried him. When he inherited his estates he heard that his neighbours were planning an attack, hoping to seize them for themselves and believing him to be too inexperienced to know how to defend them.

And so he had built the sturdy fortress that he loved so much and his neighbours, much impressed, had left him in peace.

But now the rumours had started again and the knight gathered his squires around him to listen to their advice.

"Our enemies think you're no longer capable of defending our lands," the squires told him.

"Do they indeed?" said the knight. "And what do you think?"

"We know you are still strong but we think the fortress is weak and will not withstand an attack from all our enemies," the squires replied.

"But the fortress is no older than I am," the knight said. "It has served me wonderfully all these years and we all know it so well. My enemies know its strength too and have never dared to attack me yet."

"All the same," the squires insisted, "we need newer and better defences in the meadows around the fortress, with thicker walls and deeper ditches, a wider moat and taller towers from which to fight and defend you when the attack comes."

"Well," said the knight, "if this is what you truly believe, go ahead and build your new defences and defend them bravely. But be sure of one thing, I shall make my stand here in the fortress I first built."

And so for nearly a year his army dug

deep into the soil of the pleasant green meadows of his childhood until the yellow king-cups and purple thistle flowers were replaced by a new ring of stone and timber and iron.

Satisfied at last, the squires raised the standard alongside their battle pennants over the formidable new defences and said:

"Now we can repel our enemies and win any battle they force upon us."

One day, soon afterwards, the knight was making his routine tour of the old fortress.

He walked around the tall battlements inspecting the thick walls, the narrow loop-holes, the broad moat and the solid gate-house with its heavy iron draw-bridge.

Then he climbed to the top of the main tower and, looking beyond the thick forests to the furthest limits of his estates, saw on the horizon the enemy armies advancing.

The cry went out and he offered a silent prayer as he watched his troops preparing themselves for the attack.

Then the old knight climbed down to the fortress courtyard to marshal the final defence of his domains.

And there he was amused, though not surprised, to find all his squires awaiting him and gathered not on the new defences but within the old and familiar fortress walls.

## THE KNIGHT AT THE CROSSROADS

Once there was a knight who had been riding for many days through a deep forest. All around him tree trunks as thick as cathedral pillars rose and arched high above his head. His horse picked its own way under the green vaulted canopy as the knight's feet hung loose from the stirrups and the reins lay slack in his hands. Occasionally the stillness was broken by the snapping of a stick beneath the horse's hooves, startling deer which broke cover among the bluebells.

Eventually he emerged into harsh sunlight and found himself in a stark and unfamiliar landscape of walled enclosures filled with docile sheep. Before him lay a road, a dust- grey line, undulating wearily to the horizon. The knight felt ill at ease in these neatly ordered surroundings and the road ahead seemed far too long.

But then he reached a cross-roads. At each corner stood a large marker stone while on a grassy circle at the centre was a little hut with a straw roof and smoke wafting from its low doorway. Beside the hut was a large and battered wooden sign-post with its fingers pointing in four directions. Draped over the fingers was a variety of shirts and trousers drying in the sun – clothes which appeared to belong to a man lying in the grass.

"Good afternoon, stranger," said the knight as his horse came to a halt, lowering its head to browse on a large clump of sweet grass.

"Don't stop here!" cried the man, jumping to his feet and waving his arms as the knight swung down from his saddle. "Go wherever you was going, but don't stop here." The man paused and added more calmly: "And as for being a stranger well, just who isn't a stranger round here?"

The knight glanced again at the thatched hut, the washing on the lop-sided sign-post, the sheep and the little walled fields. He saw nothing to fear.

"And why should I not have stopped here?"

"Because now you'll have to decide where to go next," the man replied, sinking back into the grass and staring at the sky.

"I see," said the knight, loosening the horse's girth. "And who are you?"

"An outcast, sir," the man replied.

"An outcast from what? Who made you an outcast?"

"See them four stones?" the outcast said, sitting up and pointing around him. "Them's landmarks, with writing on them. And the writing says that all this land belongs to particular people there and there and there and there," he said, jabbing his finger all around him.

He sighed and lay down again: "Know something? Not long ago, this was all forest."

"Yes, I do know," said the knight, removing his sword and buckler. "I remember how it was. It was years ago but I remember it all the same."

"Well," said the outcast wearily, "now all this land and all them bloody sheep belong to people. To some people, that is. And when a thing belongs to some people it don't belong to all the other people."

The knight was impressed by this simple logic.

"Same with me," he continued. "I don't belong, so I'm an outcast."

"Can't you go somewhere else?" asked the knight, peering at the sign.

"Ah, it's not that easy. You have to choose. When it was all forest, you went where you wanted. Now they give you a choice. They say that you're fortunate to have a choice. They say you're free because you have a choice. But it's them that chooses what you can choose from. They say: 'Do you want to go left or right' and you think about it and very soon you've forgotten that you was thinking of going straight ahead or that you could have turned back or that you might have gone off in any of a dozen other directions. And if you ignore their choices and you stray off their roads, you're a trespasser on someone's property."

"But surely a sign-post is quite helpful," said the knight reasonably.

"Not at all," said the outcast taking off a shoe and hammering at a column of ants between his feet. "It's a tyranny. Soon as you stop to think about it you know there's a good chance you'll make a bad choice and go where you'd never have gone without them suggesting it – and then you come to regret it. So that's why I tell people not to stop here. Keep going, I say."

The knight stared at the ants which had resumed their orderly procession.

"And what makes it worse," the outcast continued, "is if you choose one road you're rejecting another and people notice things like that."

The knight sat down, gazed at the hills and listened to the bleating sheep. "Excuse me asking you, sir, but which way are you going?"

"I'm going home."

"I suppose that's what we're all doing," the outcast observed thoughtfully. "But how do you know which way to go?"

"Well, by night I follow the stars and by day I stop and ask people. But mostly I follow my instincts and trust my horse. By the way, do you have any water?"

The outcast fetched a bucket from the hut and they watered the horse.

"But the stars don't say 'take this road and then take that road', do they?"

"No," the knight agreed, "they don't. And nor do the people I meet. They simply warn me of the dangers of going this way, the wisdom of going that way, or the pleasures I might find by going another way."

"Exactly! You ask them and they help you. They don't stop you and make you decide," said the outcast over his shoulder as he headed back to his hut.

The knight lay gazing at the clouds for some time until his thoughts were disturbed by an appalling noise. He sat up just in time to see the outcast wielding a big stick and aiming a second vicious blow at the battered sign-post, followed by several hard kicks. The fingers shook.

Satisfied, the outcast sat down.

"The worst of it all is that there's no end to it," he said. "One sign always leads to another. And then there's you, sir, a brave knight. When you stand here in front of that sign-post, do you accept their right to stop you in your tracks, offer you choices you never wanted and then challenge you to make a decision? Tell me, sir, what right do they have to do that?"

"Yes, I know. And of course you're right," said the knight with a grin as he picked up his sword, tightened the horse's girth and mounted the saddle. "My friend, why don't you come with me and be my companion?"

"Oh, thank you, sir," said the outcast, bowing low. "That's a very kind offer and one I'd very much like to accept. But the choice isn't mine. As you see, someone has to stay here to warn all the others who

pass this way."

The knight bowed too and then rode slowly back to the forest. But before he was entirely reclaimed by its green freedom, he looked over his shoulder. The tiny figure at the cross-roads was still waving him farewell.

## THE KNIGHT WHO SAW TOO MUCH

Once upon a time an English knight and a French knight were sitting side by side on a blanket, high on a hill under the branches of an olive tree, peeling oranges.

Below them lay a lifeless village where every blackened room of every butchered cottage lay roofless and crudely exposed to the midday sun. On the hills around them, smoke from dozens of other villages mingled in the haze. Occasionally the bark of an abandoned dog echoed from somewhere in the deserted valley.

A little way off the French knight's priest and a small group of servants sat in a circle among the wild flowers. Nearby a young groom was watering the English knight's brightly dressed horse and several mules which were hobbled in the shade of a Cyprus tree. The groom was being teased by two little girls who were trying to crown him with daisy-chains.

"Who are those girls?" the French knight asked.

"It's hard to say," the English knight replied. "I found them in a village two years ago. They were the only survivors. They had nowhere to go and attached themselves to me. They've never spoken a word and can't even tell me their names. They were aged about nine and ten. So, I still call them 'nine' and 'ten'."

The Frenchman hugged his knees and gazed thoughtfully into the abandoned village below.

"And what brought you here?" he said at last.

"My king sent me here four years ago," the Englishman replied. "He and your duke are planning a new crusade. They know their armies have to pass this way. I'm here simply to observe, to report, to describe what I see."

"But this isn't war as they know it," the Frenchman said, "not a war of faith or principle. These are wolves fighting over the still-beating heart of a dismembered corpse. Will you tell them that?"

The Englishman laughed: "I'll tell them the truth," he said, "but they of course will only hear and believe what they wish to hear and believe."

"Naturally!" said the Frenchman, "How else would they persuade young men to

throw away their lives two thousand miles from home!"

Just then the two girls came running towards them pointing excitedly into the valley. Shading their eyes from the sun, the knights saw a ragged band of men, women and ponies approaching across the valley floor.

"Looters again!" sighed the English knight wearily. And for a while the knights and their servants watched from the hill-top as the slowly advancing horde made its way towards the village.

But then, quite suddenly, the English knight stiffened. He had spotted a wisp of fresh blue smoke rising from a chimney in one of the ruined cottages below.

"They must have hidden some of the women," he said, "and now the women think it's safe to come out. We'll have to try to warn them."

Leaving the others on the hill-top the French knight followed his friend in a headlong race into the valley.

Later they stood panting among the cluster of ruins, the smell of burning mingled with the stench of rotting flesh.

The looters had seen them coming and were now running off with whatever they had managed to scavenge.

The knights separated, the Frenchman heading for caves by the river while the Englishman searched the narrow, rubble-strewn alleys until he found the cottage with the smoking chimney.

Cautiously he stepped over a body slumped in a half-collapsed doorway, startling a rat which vanished into the corpse's gaping mouth.

He found himself in a room open to the sky, the back half of it hidden by part of the collapsed roof.

Treading carefully over the broken roof-tiles and smouldering timbers, for fear of traps or snares, he approached the dark space beyond. Gradually his eyes adjusted to the dim light.

On a table before him lay a young woman. Her shoulders were slightly raised against the wall and her hands and black hair were tethered to a ring above her head.

She was naked from the chest down, staring in wide-eyed astonishment between her bare splayed knees. Between her feet, which were nailed to the table, lay a knife.

Appalled by the silence and white with fear and cold, the English knight took a step forward, and then another.

Now he could see the long slack wound sagging from her rib-cage to the black triangle between her thighs. Looking down he found he was standing in the contents of her belly.

He turned and in retching spasms spewed the contents of his own belly down the wall beside her head.

Eventually he braced himself to face the woman again and with shaking fingers found himself unwinding her hair from her wrists and laying it around her shoulders.

For one insane moment he thought her eyes had turned to look at him.

And then he was aware of figures in the doorway, the silhouettes of the two girls standing side by side, silent as ever.

"You shouldn't be here," he said gently. "Please go away."

But something in his voice only drew them closer.

The younger girl took his hand and watched solemnly as her sister lowered the woman's smock to cover her waist.

It was then that he heard her speak for the first time in two years:

"She'll die soon," said the older girl, her head bowed and her hands folded in front on her.

He could no longer avoid the truth. The woman's ashen face had never moved, but her pleading eyes were indeed looking up at him.

He had seen them once before, long ago, the large eyes of a pretty black colt in the candlelight.

"Go outside," he told the girls, "I'll join you soon." From his pocket he drew a small knife and delicately opened an artery in her neck. She had little left to lose and it didn't take long.

Outside, the English knight sat absorbing the heat of the sun and watching the girls poking with sticks among the litter of other people's lives.

Eventually the French knight joined them, his face giving no clue as to what he had found in the caves.

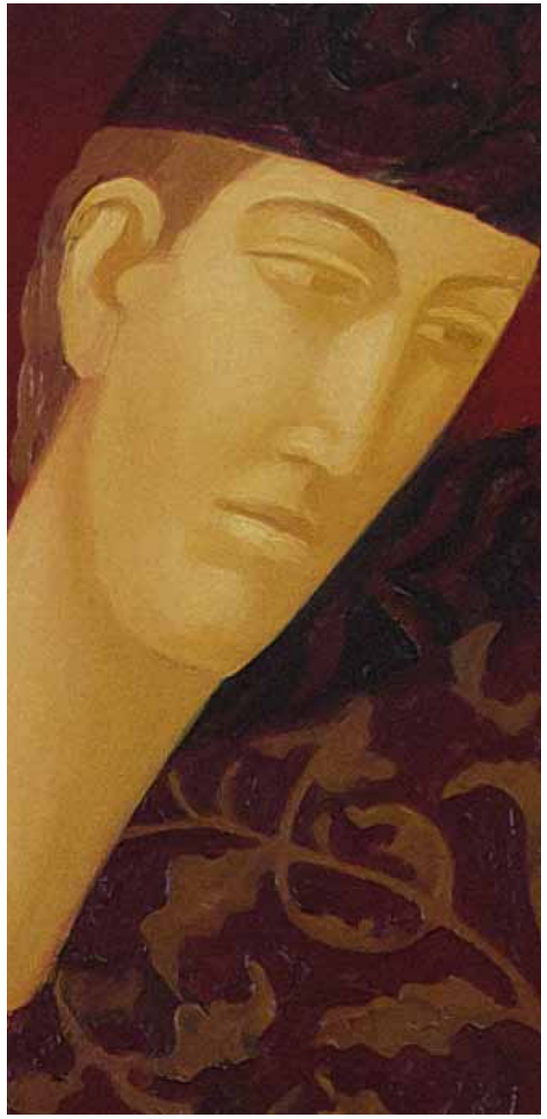
"What are you doing down here?" the Frenchman asked the girls with mock gravity, scarcely expecting a reply.

"We've been to see our mother... no, a lady," said the younger one in a clear voice,

offering him a broken lamp and blushing when she heard her mistake.

"Ah!" said the Frenchman exchanging a glance with his English friend. "Don't you think that deserves a glass?"

Hoisting the girls onto their shoulders they began the long climb back to the top of the hill.



## THE KNIGHT AND THE DAMSEL

Once, after the English knight had been riding for some hours, he reached the edge of a small clearing in the woods.

From under a fringe of trees he saw that it resembled an arena, being almost perfectly oval, its deep green grass surrounded by a wall of white- flowered rhododendrons. Behind stood a wall of tall evergreens, their tops gilded by the afternoon sun.

Near the centre of the clearing was a small solitary tree, while beyond it the knight was surprised to see the pale naked back of a girl standing waist-deep in the still water of a pool surrounded by bull-rushes.

Embarrassed at disturbing her he climbed from his horse, tethered it to a low branch and, with his back to her, made an elaborate inspection of his saddle-bags. When at last he turned again the girl was wearing a plain white dress and was tied to the lone tree, gazing into the distance.

He approached her cautiously and she suddenly turned to him in alarm.

"Please, don't be frightened," he said.

"Of course I'm frightened," she replied. "I'm a damsel in distress."

"I imagined you might be," said the knight as the girl struggled a little against the rope around her waist.

"Would you like me to untie you?"

"Release!" said the girl. "You're supposed to release me. First you're supposed to slay the dragon and then you release me. Without asking."

"I see," he said, glancing around him. "And... where's your dragon?" The girl rolled her eyes: "You don't really believe in dragons, do you?" "You mentioned them first," the knight replied firmly.

There was a pause.

"Well," sighed the damsel, leaning back against the tree, "perhaps you should. There are dragons. They do exist, you know."

"Yes," he replied, "I imagine we all have dragons to deal with."

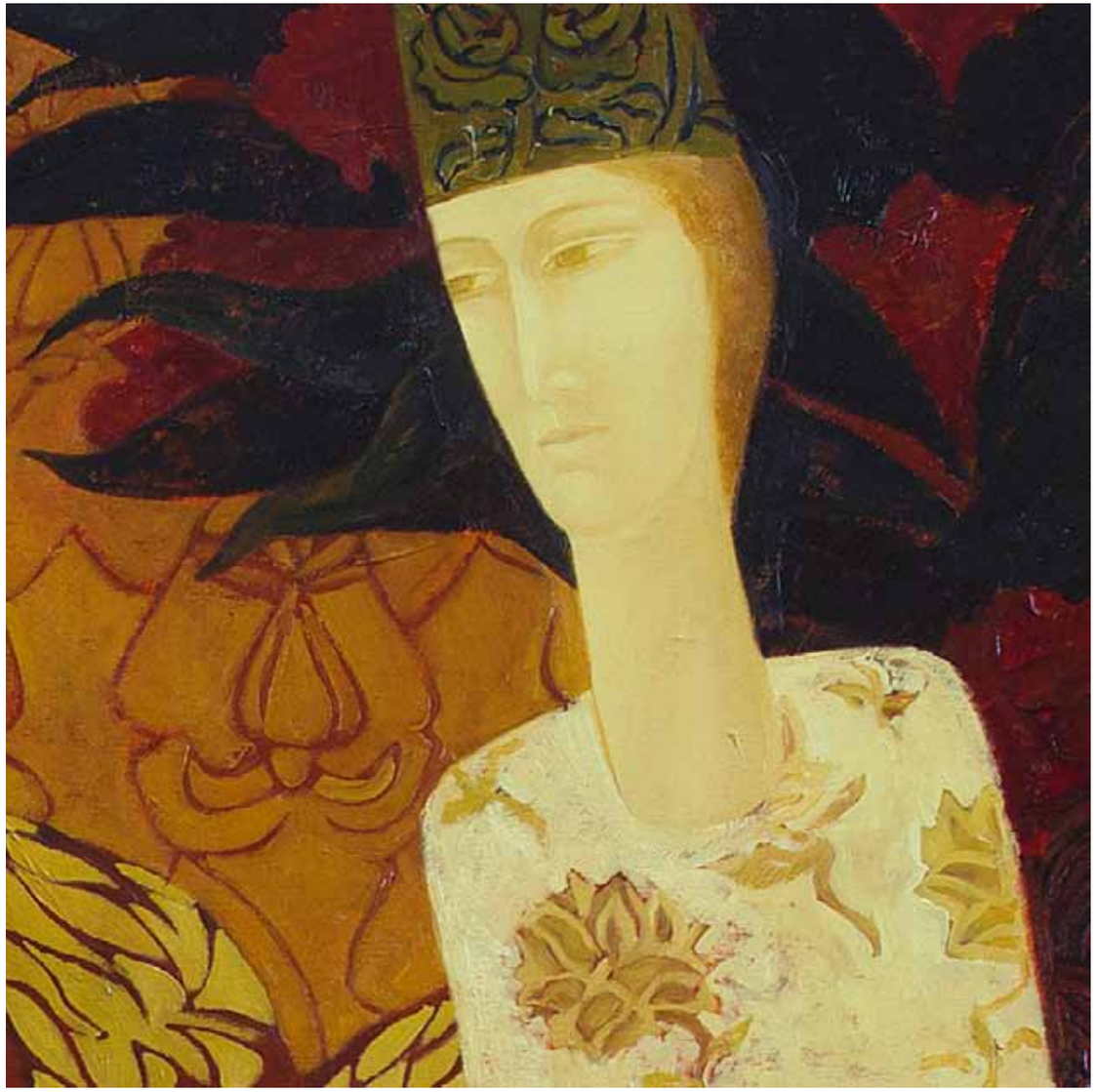
"So, if you know so much about them, tell me something: why do knights always have to go around slaying dragons for damsels? Why don't they face their own."

"Perhaps we hope you might help us to kill our dragons in return," the knight suggested.

And they looked steadily into each other's eyes for the first time. The girl slipped out of the rope.

"Come with me," she said. And she took his hand and led him to the edge of the pool where they stared at the water side by side. "Tell me what you see."

"I see our reflections in the water," he said. "What do you see?" "I see you looking at me reflected in the water," she replied.



## THE KNIGHT AND THE SILVER BOWL

Once there was a young knight whose life was full of beautiful things. In his vast and delightful castle, every room and corridor was filled with rich carpets, rare books, elegant furnishings and exquisite objects of every sort. From the walls hung lush tapestries and rich paintings.

And in the flicker of candle-light, delicate porcelain, shipped across a dozen seas, glinted in walnut cabinets and was reflected a thousand times in the gleam of silver salvers and the sparkle of crystal vases adorning delicate rosewood consoles and fine oak tables.

His many visitors imagined him to be a happy man. But this was not the case. Only his closest friends knew that, despite all his apparent good fortune, he was miserable. In fact he grew so wretchedly unhappy that he came to believe that his sorrow was the result of being burdened by too many possessions. And so, eventually, he decided to give them all away.

One by one he asked his friends to come and take anything which might bring them some of the happiness that he sought for himself. And so, day by day and room by room, the castle was gradually emptied until he was left with just one bag containing his most personal belongings and he was able to turn the key in the lock and say farewell to his home for ever.

With the bag over his shoulder, the young knight set off to explore the world, hoping that somehow or somewhere he would find the peace of mind that had always eluded him. As the years went by his search took him through every country he had ever heard of and many others besides. And wherever he went, from the highest of mountains to the deepest of valleys and from the driest of deserts to the thickest of jungles, he sought out simple people, hoping that they might reveal the wisdom he was seeking.

In return for his meals and lodging, he helped them to work their fields or to land their fishing nets, watched over their sheep or cut wood for an evening fire. And after supper he would often ask them why they seemed so content with so little while he, with his few remaining things, was not.

Then, with smiles and barely hidden

curiosity, they would ask to see the contents of his bag and he would show them his set of clean clothes and the knife he used to cut his bread and the pipe he played to amuse himself and the book containing the sketches he made and the pen with which he drew them and finally the fine silver bowl from which he ate and drank.

One day, after many, many years and when his hair had already grown white, he found himself at a great crossroads in the Marmara Valley, sitting under the stars with a shepherd who was sharing his cloak with a young girl beside him.

"So, you seek contentment," the shepherd observed as he drew the girl closer to him, stroking her arm, and by the light of the fire he surveyed the knight's few simple belongings.

"Then tell me," he asked, "which of these could you not live without?" And the knight, thinking carefully, replied: "The bowl. The silver bowl."

There was a long silence before the knight stood up, put the bowl in his pocket, thanked the shepherd and walked away, leaving the remainder of his possessions beside them.

As the years went by, the ageing knight saw many extraordinary things, met many remarkable people and had many adventures. A simple man with his simple silver bowl, he made many friends and was greeted with affection wherever he went. But at heart he remained unhappy. Fifty years after locking his castle door, he had still not found peace of mind.

One day, approaching a village, he saw an old woman struggling to lift her bucket from a well. On frail legs he hobbled stiffly to help her. Thanking him, the old women explained that she was now so weak she could no longer carry her water home to drink. The knight thought for a few moments and then drew the bowl from his pocket and gave it to her.

"But surely you need it yourself?" she said.

"No," he replied slowly, "no, I don't think I do."

They sat for a while in the setting sun as she turned the silver bowl in her hands, deep in thought, and as he experienced a growing feeling of deep contentment.

And then he explained that he must leave. But, as he struggled to his feet, he stumbled, his legs no longer able to support him.

The old lady went to a nearby thicket and returned with a stout stick. "And you, dear friend, will need this," she said, touching his arm.

And it was then that he noticed her white dress hitched at the waist by a rope, reminding him of a time long ago. They looked into each other's eyes for a moment before he finally turned away and she watched the man and his stick until they vanished in the dust and the evening shadows.

## A GLIMPSE OF CHILDHOOD

Once I walked into a room and stood with my back against the closed door. And I saw a young woman sitting with her back to me holding in her arms a baby in a long white shawl. Opposite her was a man who hung his head in his hands and combed his fingers through his hair. Between them was a table laid for the man and the woman but there was no food or drink.

And I turned to the mother and baby and I said:

"Are you happy?"

And she smiled and wiped the baby's mouth and her breast and I knew her answer and that she had not heard my question.

So I turned to the man and I said:

"Why do you look so sad?"

And he hung his head lower and I realised that, although he had not heard my question, I knew his answer.

Then I turned and walked through the French windows and across the lawn and saw an old lady with fat pink arms picking lavender at a table under the trees in a corner. She looked up as I approached and then went back to her work as I watched in silence.

Then she looked up again and said:

"Well, my child, I didn't call you here to watch me!"

And I said:

"Did you call me? Was it you that called me?"

And she said:

"Does it matter whether or who when there's work to be done?"

So we picked lavender in silence while the bumble-bees drifted among the cut stems on the table.

But soon there was no more lavender and I turned to the old lady and I said to her:

"Have I seen you before and how did you know to call me? Have I seen you before?"

And she said softly:

"Of course you have, my child. Of course you have."

And I said:

"Oh yes, I remember now."

But I didn't.

Soon there was a sound from the windows of the house behind me and it was a familiar sound. It was the strange comforting sound of the piano tuner with his repetitive searching notes and then a tentative chord and finally a curious infinite melody – no beginning, no end.

"It's the piano tuner!" I said. "Who plays...?"

But the old lady was walking away from me between the trees. I called after her:

"Does the lady with the baby play the piano?"

She turned back for a moment and said:

"There's no lady, no baby. You see, you're dreaming, my child. You've been dreaming again."

And then she was gone and the piano was silent and the smell of the lavender vanished, along with the warmth of the sun.

The garden grew cold and dark and the house was entangled in a rampant mesh of thorns whose barbed branches barred the windows I had walked through.


**CHRISTOPHER LONG** was born and educated in England and abandoned law studies at the Inner Temple for nearby Fleet Street, becoming a reporter, columnist and London affairs specialist for publications such as the *London Newspaper Group*, *The Evening Standard* and *London Portrait Magazine*. He went on to became the founding editor of *World Magazine* in 1987 and of *The Music Magazine* in 1990, both subsequently acquired by the BBC.

He might well have remained a familiar figure at the heart of London life but for a chance trip to Macedonia in April 1989. There he found he was the sole foreign correspondent in a position to report brutal repression in Pristina, the capital of neighbouring Kosovo.

Convinced that widespread war in Yugoslavia was inevitable, he made a speciality of Balkan affairs and covered the conflicts (1991-99) which consumed Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia-Hercegovina and finally Kosovo again. These barbaric wars killed 140,000 men, women and children and produced four million refugees.

As a correspondent for *The Evening Standard*, *BBC Radio News*, *BBC World Service*, *Sky TV*, *SABC*, *ITN*, *Channel 4*, *Globus*, *LBC, LNR, Radio Croatia*, *Reuters Radio News* and *The Observer* among others, he witnessed the sieges of Dubrovnik and Sarajevo, the dismemberment of Mostar and tragic consequences of genocide in Bosnia-Herzegovina. The cruelty in and around Mostar in particular made a great impression on him and there he was a producer of a TV documentary for *NHK Japan*.

He paid a high personal price for his eleven tours in the Balkans, but these experiences provoked him to introduce us to *The English Knight*.


*"I had spent my professional life reporting current events as dispassionately as possible and recording the lives and achievements of others. But when I thought I might not survive the war I was reporting, I seem to have had an overwhelming need to review my own life and to leave some written trace of myself. Fortunately an English knight came to my rescue.*

*"I thought I was just writing fables but now I can see that these were stories describing some of those defining moments we each experience in our own way – those times when we are most alone.*

*"Reading them today, I'm as surprised as anyone to see myself learning to deal with love and betrayal, with kindness and cruelty, discovering fundamental truths about my profession and accepting that one has little strength if one cannot acknowledge one's weakness. And finally I see myself rediscovering childhood in old age and preparing for an inevitable death."*

## *... those times when we are most alone...*

*Left: Christopher Long on a mined road near Sibenik, November 1991.*
*Below: At Pont-Farcy in Normandy with his wife Sarah in 2012.*

**TIMUR D'VATZ**'S paintings are to be found in collections and galleries throughout the world. Born in Moscow in 1968, he grew up in Uzbekistan and studied at the Republican College of Art in Tashkent (1983-87) before moving to London in 1992.

In London he won a post-graduate place at the Royal Academy of Arts Schools (1993-96) and was awarded the Jack Goldhill and Sir James Walker Scholarships. While still a student in London he started the regular biennial London shows at the Cadogan Contemporary Gallery which attracted his first collectors, some of whom remain clients to this day. Soon after, working from his studios in London and Normandy, he built his formidable reputation based on one, two or even three major exhibitions each year, at galleries in London, Paris, Dubai, Singapore, Venice, Scotland, New York, Florence and Lisbon.

Timur first met Christopher Long in 'revolutionary' Moscow in 1992 and they have remained firm friends ever since. In 1996 Timur read the series of short stories that were to become *The English Knight* and recognized immediately that their work blended perfectly. Together they explored the possibility of Timur illustrating them, a collaboration that took 18 years to come to fruition in 2014.

# The English Knight

Christopher Long
Illustrations Timur D'Vatz

PONT-FARCY
NORMANDY
2014

PONT-FARCY
NORMANDY
2014