

“Stroud is a genius” —*Rick Riordan*

THE LEGENDARY SCARLETT & BROWNE

BEING AN ACCOUNT OF THEIR FINAL
EXPLOITS & GALLANT DEEDS



JONATHAN STROUD

AUTHOR OF LOCKWOOD & CO.

PRAISE FOR SCARLETT & BROWNE

“You won’t be able to put this down. A classic in the making.”

Eoin Colfer

“This is bleedin’ brilliant from start to finish.”

SFX

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Sunday Times

“Exhilarating and explosive, humorous and heartfelt, imaginative and irreverent – this trilogy is storytelling perfection.”

A.F. Steadman

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First published 2025 by Walker Books Ltd
87 Vauxhall Walk, London SE11 5HJ

2 4 6 8 10 9 7 5 3 1

Text © 2025 Jonathan Stroud
Cover artwork © 2025 Tom Clohosy Cole
Interior map illustrations © 2025 Tomislav Tomić

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EU Authorized Representative: HackettFlynn Ltd, 36 Cloch Choirneal, Balrothery, Co. Dublin, K32 C942, Ireland. EU@walkerpublishinggroup.com

Printed and bound by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon CR0 4YY

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data:
a catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

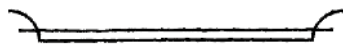
ISBN 978-1-5295-1437-7

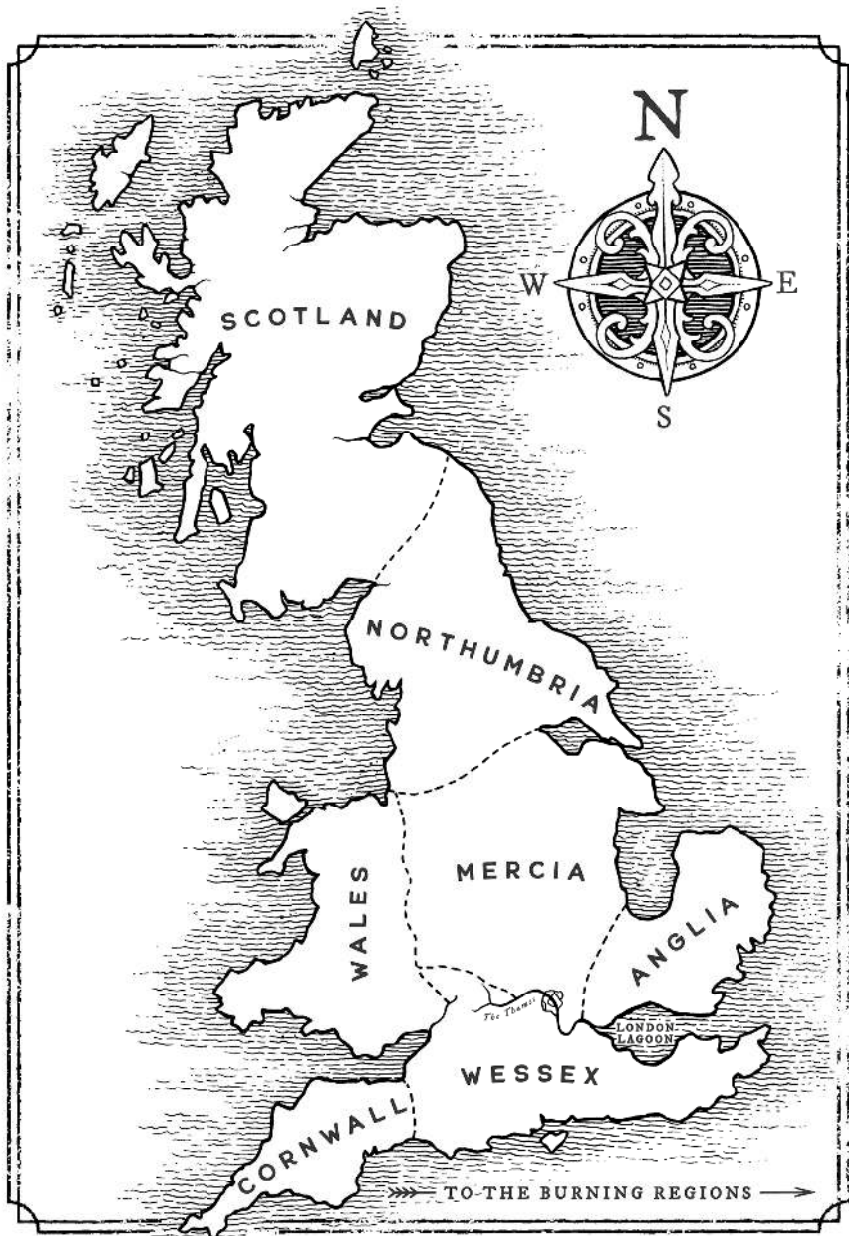
www.walker.co.uk



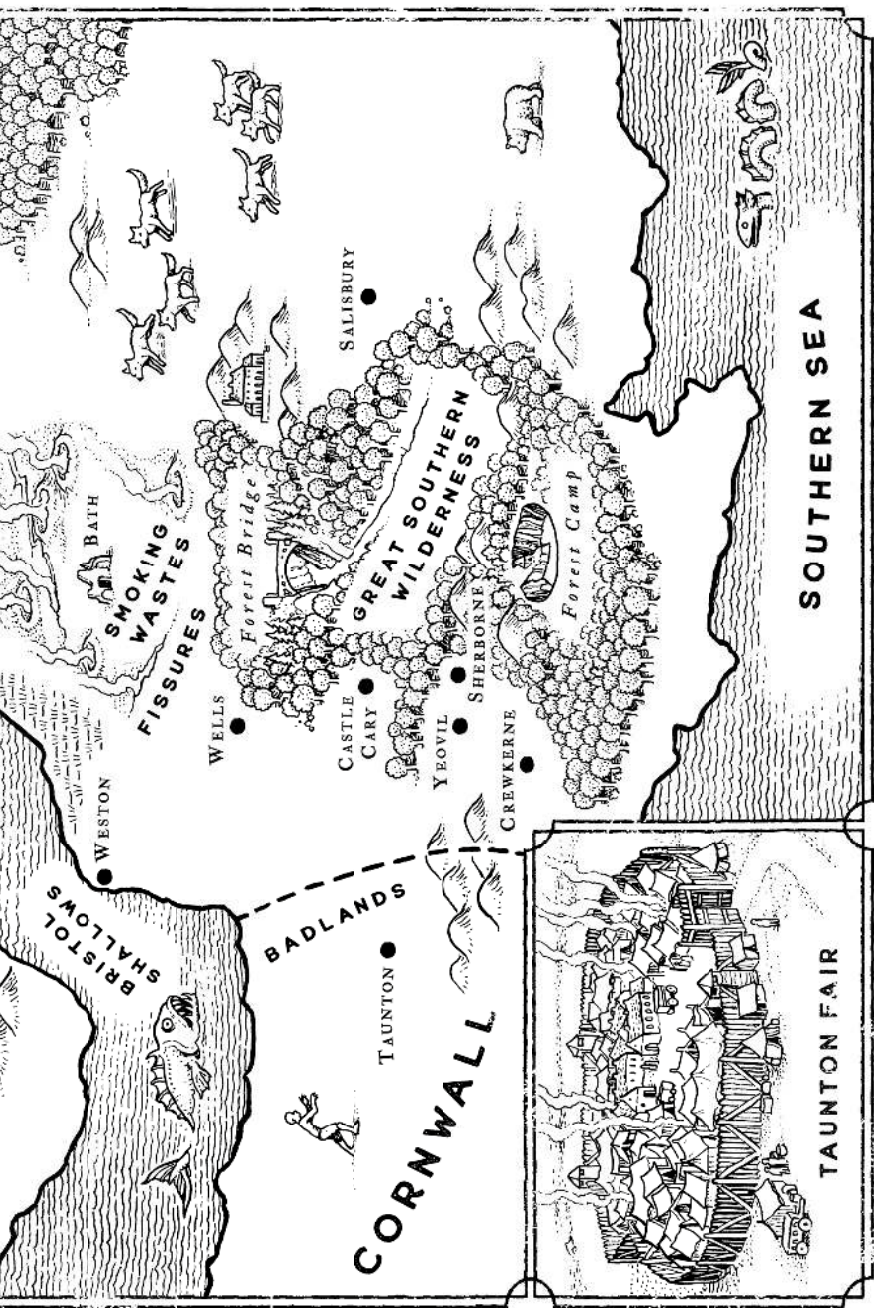


*For Liz,
brave, beautiful, inspiring,
and for
Colin, Max and Jake
with love*





THE SEVEN KINGDOMS



I

THE SEARCHERS

1

THAT AFTERNOON, FOR HIS LATEST CRIME AGAINST THE FAITH Houses, the barber-surgeon Harold O'Shaughnessy was escorted from the town. It was a fine day for an execution. A fresh breeze made the pennants flap bravely on the stockade. Spring sunshine lit the treetops. The sky was eggshell blue. As O'Shaughnessy remarked to his jailer, things could have been worse. At least he wasn't going to be eaten in the rain.

A festive crowd had gathered on the moat bridge. Some drank beer, others sipped coffee; everyone ate slices of fruit cake provided by the Yeovil Women's Institute for the occasion. The ceremony itself did not take long. O'Shaughnessy was prodded with the poles of justice and cursed by the town elders. His clothes were daubed with yellow paint, signifying moral turpitude, and flecked with meat paste to encourage the attentions of wild beasts. Then he was made to stand on the expulsion stone just outside the gate, while the Chief Mentor gave the final declaration.

“For repeated irreverence, for holding injurious opinions, for chafing against the moral fabric of society; for refusing to partake in Faith House duties, and for general slander and corruption of

the young, Harold O'Shaughnessy is hereby sentenced to three nights' enchainment in Far Forest glade. After three nights, if he is yet living, his soul shall be considered cleansed, and we shall welcome him back with open arms."

The Mentor finished; there was the briefest rustling as he folded up his paper. On his stone the barber stared impassively at the sky, while the crowd below chewed their cake in wonder. Three nights? *Three* nights in the forest?

One thing was certain. The Faith Houses *really* wanted to be rid of him.

Now a drumbeat started, courtesy of a lad tapping a tom-tom covered in Tainted skin. The chaining party set off, the Mentor at its head, followed by the acned drummer, then four militiamen escorting the condemned man. O'Shaughnessy, who was a small, dapper person with olive skin and a neat black beard, smiled and nodded at his neighbours as he passed them. He was determined to put on a good show. Last of all came the Sergeant of the Iron Posts, his blood-red bowler shining in the sun.

The procession crossed the bridge, then left the road by a dirt track that led off across the bright grass of the meadow. A barrier of trees rose up ahead. The path plunged into the forest, and the air became thick with the resinous odour of the pines. It was shady in the woods. The drum beat softly, and the militiamen drew their pistols. The barber's step faltered. They had to urge him on by yanking on his ropes.

In due course, they reached the edge of the safe-lands, where the path ended in a sunlit clearing. Here two iron posts, eight feet tall and festooned with chains, stood atop a concrete platform. The glade was filled with wild scrub, with black rocks jutting

from the soil. It was an oppressive place and very still. The forest enfolded it like the mouth of a metal trap.

The Mentor gave his orders, and the militiamen led the criminal to the nearest post. O'Shaughnessy attempted pleasantries with the men, each of whom had been a friend or neighbour, but they refused to speak to him. Why should they? For them, as for most of the folk in Yeovil, he was already dead. It would have been like chatting with a ghost.

Soon enough, the work was done. O'Shaughnessy was chained in position. The men gathered close together on the path, wide-eyed, watching the forest. The tops of the trees were flecked with pink. The sun was going down.

Now the Sergeant of the Iron Posts stepped close to inspect the chains.

O'Shaughnessy had been waiting for the chance. "*Jim*," he whispered. "*Jim*."

The Sergeant ran his big hands along the links, testing them. He didn't look up.

"*Jim*," O'Shaughnessy said again. "For old times. Keep it a little loose for me."

The Sergeant glanced across to where the Mentor stood watching them, light glinting on his glasses and his mop of sandy hair. He cleared his throat. "Can't," he said.

"Leave me a gun, then."

"You know I can't do that."

"A knife. A gun. Anything."

"I'm sorry, Harold."

There was a silence. "Well," the barber said. "I guess I'll see you in three days."

The Sergeant sighed. “Harry,” he said softly, “I give you a couple of hours at most.”

O’Shaughnessy maintained his attitude of careless defiance until the party left the glade. As the drumming faded, he let his shoulders sag. He slumped to a sitting position, chains clinking against the platform. A couple of hours? He knew he’d be lucky to get that.

But perhaps there *was* a chance. It was not unknown for human wanderers to walk the woods. Robbers, for example, or other outcasts... Such folk might visit the posts to pick among the bones. Perhaps someone would come! Someone who might be induced to free him! The fragment of hope made O’Shaughnessy’s heart grind against his chest.

First, however, he must survive the night.

The clearing was still. Frogs croaked in an unseen pond. The forest canopy was picked out with a last sweet crispness, but the trees below were dark and dim. The barber found his attention drawn to a particular spot on the far side of the glade. Here one half-fallen pine crossed in front of another, so that the space below had the appearance of an arch. The gap was really no blacker than anywhere else... Nevertheless, he found it hard to look away.

Time passed. Daylight withdrew from the clearing. Birds transected a corner of the glade, black seeds caught on the currents of the air. They flowed over the treetops and out of sight. Now a bright, barbarous moon rose above the treetops, sharp as a scimitar.

O’Shaughnessy became aware that the quality of the silence had changed.

How was it different? He tensed, listening... The frogs no longer croaked. The birds had gone... Moonlight slanted past, carrying tumbling dust and spores. Below the glittering posts, the Yeovil path was a white seam, twisting away into the dark.

His skin crawled. He stared at the black notch in the trees.

No, it was all right. There was nothing to be seen.

But what about *behind* him? With sudden urgency, he got to his feet, fighting against the weight of the chains. He craned his neck, shuffled his feet, turned laboriously around the post. The chains made a clinking and a grating as he moved. The noise was loud and the barber regretted it, but he could not bear to think of death creeping up silently at his back.

Now he faced the rear of the glade. What did he see? A wall of black pine trees. Rocks, dusted with moonlight. Open heather. Stars.

Nothing else.

The barber blew out his cheeks in relief.

With a clinking of chains, he shuffled back around the post. He completed the circuit, and looked at the hole in the trees again.

Three tall white shapes stood there.

For a moment, O'Shaughnessy was frozen. Then, all at once, he understood how his life would end. He pulled frantically at his bonds; he pushed back against the post, as if, by sheer force of desperation, he might drive his body through it. Chains clattered, muscles strained, joints cracked and popped. The iron bonds held firm.

The shapes had not yet moved. They were granular, indistinct, appallingly thin. Their arms were bent, their fingers long and curved.

The barber gave a small involuntary cry. As if they had been waiting for this signal, the apparitions drifted slowly forwards, flitting between the rocks and scrub.

O'Shaughnessy spasmed against the post; his wrists twisted in their metal cuffs. The forms drew nearer. He saw their trailing arms, their stooped backs, the grey-white hollows of their bellies... And now they caught his scent! Now they ran! Now they bounded, hopped and skipped among the bushes, and still they made no noise.

O'Shaughnessy's limbs had turned to water. His strength was gone. He saw the nearest Tainted leap onto the platform. It cocked its head and looked at him. Moonlight played upon the dead-white skin. Pupiless eyes glittered; he heard the clicking of its teeth. It poised itself to spring—

A gunshot tore the silence. The barber flinched. The creature staggered; it stared down at a dark hole flowering in the middle of its chest. It clutched at the hole, as if trying to smear the mark away. Another shot rang out. The Tainted gave a yelp, fell off the platform and began thrashing unpleasantly in the scrub.

The barber looked up. Beyond was a black rock, lit by moonlight.

A girl was standing on it.

She was as pale as a spirit risen from the earth – a spirit with a smoking pistol in one hand. In the other she held a knife. A great tangle of hair blew out from beneath a broad-brimmed hat. Her long leather coat swung back and forth as she shot the thing on the ground twice more, then fired once each at the others. The second Tainted dropped to its knees and sprang up again; the third howled in defiance and remained standing.

The gun was empty. The girl cursed, tucked it into her belt, blew hair out of her face. She raised the knife in readiness as the two creatures drew in from either side.

A jaunty whistle sounded in the dark. The Tainted paused; both they and the barber turned their heads. *Another* figure was approaching! This time it was a boy, slim and slight, no taller than the girl. He was clambering over a tussock onto the other side of the platform. He looked dishevelled and out of breath.

The girl was glaring at him. “About time!”

“Sorry, Scarlett.”

“I’m up to my eyeballs in Tainted here.”

“I only see a couple.”

“I’ve already shot one, before you showed. It’d better be a good excuse.”

“It is. I got my trousers caught on some brambles, and— Oh, hold on...”

The nearest Tainted had turned on its heels and leaped for him. The boy raised a hand: the creature slammed to a standstill in mid-air. Then, to the barber’s numb astonishment, it spun away and upward, in the direction indicated by the boy’s casual hand. The creature’s limbs were outstretched, its teeth bared. Its features blurred as it whirled up across the clearing and off over the forests. Smaller, smaller... In the blink of an eye, it was gone.

“So you caught your trousers on some brambles, did you?” The girl was watching the last remaining Tainted, which, after some hesitation, had resumed its creeping towards her.

“Right! I had to tear myself free.” The boy hopped off the platform. “Here, check out the rip. You won’t believe the hole.”

“Thanks, but I think I’ll give that a miss.” The girl dropped

flat as the creature launched itself at her. She rolled clear of the flailing claws, stabbed upwards with the knife as it passed above. It dropped into the heather, was up again, emitting a continuous squeal. The boy raised a hand: the Tainted shot backwards across the glade and struck a distant tree. The shrieking abruptly stopped.

The girl got to her feet. “It was a life-and-death situation, Albert. I was out of bullets.”

“Oh, you’d have managed.”

“I’d have had my head ripped off and used for a football. That’s not the same thing.”

“I suppose not.” The boy scratched at his shock of black hair. “Well, it’s ended happily. Your head’s still on. There are three fewer Tainted in the world.” He grinned across at the barber, who flinched back in his chains. “Plus we saved this beardy guy.”

“Yeah.” The girl was reloading her gun. “What shape’s he in?”

“Fair to middling.”

“Any bit been eaten?”

“Depends how many legs he had to start with. Are you OK there, fellow?”

Harry O’Shaughnessy opened his mouth to speak, but only a gassy, whining sound came out. He shook, he trembled; he stared numbly at his rescuer. The boy had an old militia jacket on, dark jeans on his skinny legs, white trainers that were slightly too big for him. He looked inconsequential, as if a burly toddler could knock him down.

O’Shaughnessy remembered the Tainted spinning away across the moon.

“Shock,” the boy advised. “You’ll get over it. Let’s see about these chains.”

He stepped close to the post. The barber gave a moan of terror and squeezed his eyes tight shut. There was a snap of metal and a heavy impact behind him. Opening his eyes, craning his neck, O'Shaughnessy saw the chains in pieces and the iron post lying at a distance in the heather. The boy was glancing at his watch.

"We'd better get a shift on, Scarlett. We're running late now, and I'm hungry."

"You're *always* hungry..." The girl seemed lost in thought. With dirty fingers, she was tapping a cylindrical leather box hung about her neck. She glared up at O'Shaughnessy, who was getting shakily to his feet. "Hey. You. Quick question. Did I swear just now?"

"What?"

"During the fight with the monsters. Did I swear? I don't recall."

"I – I think you did."

"Goddamn it. Well, it was Albert's fault for not showing up quick enough. Really, he's the one who should be paying." She took two coins from a coat pocket and poked them into a hole in the box. "Anyway, that's done. All right, Albert. Let's go."

O'Shaughnessy was less frightened of the newcomers than he had been of the Tainted, but it was a close-run thing. Nevertheless, as he watched the boy cross over to the girl, he realized with a jolt that they were about to walk away and leave him.

He coughed loudly. "Excuse me."

The boy looked back. "Yes?"

"You're not thinking of— Well, look, you've saved my life. I'm eternally in your debt."

"True. But don't let it keep you awake at night." From

somewhere, the girl had picked up a rucksack, festooned with tubes and bottles. “Goodbye.”

“No! Wait – let me come with you! Please... I can’t stay alone in the forest!”

“Why not? We killed the Tainted.”

“Yes, but the woods contain other creatures too! Dire-foxes and savage wolves! Hopping spiders! Snakes and blood-otters! Man-eating bears!”

“Ticks,” the girl said.

“I’m sorry?”

“You forgot the giant ticks. They sit in the trees, and jump on your head as you go by.”

The boy nodded. “Before you know it, they’ve sucked an arm dry, leaving it all wobbly and loose like an empty sleeve. That’s worse than any bear.”

There was a pause. O’Shaughnessy stared at them. “Right, so there are ticks as well. The point I’m trying to make is (a), the woods are bad and (b), if I stay here, I will perish.”

The girl looked at him. With a sigh of exasperation, she stepped in close. New details became evident with her proximity: she wore a woollen jersey beneath her coat, worn jeans and boots; she smelled of gunpowder and the Wilds. Under the shadow of her hat, her eyes were very bright. “What’s your name?” she asked. “Why did they chain you here?”

“My name is Harold O’Shaughnessy. As to why I have been cruelly abandoned, it is a long and mournful story, which—”

“Which we haven’t got time for. What can you tell me, Albert?”

The boy regarded O’Shaughnessy for a few seconds with

his big dark eyes. “He’s a barber,” he said, “who does a little bit of doctoring and surgery on the side. He’s also a dissident who insulted the Mentors, refused to attend the services, abandoned all prescribed religions. He spent his time in tea shops with the youth of Yeovil, debating philosophy, questioning the morality of the Faith Houses, and making rude remarks about the integrity of the militia. He was driven to this...” The boy stopped abruptly. “Ah.”

“Go on,” the girl said.

“He was driven to this by the loss of his wife and daughter. His wife died in childbirth. The infant was born with a disability and was removed by the Mentors shortly after birth.”

Silence in the glade. The barber looked at the boy.

“I read minds,” the boy added. “Along with all the other stuff.”

O’Shaughnessy nodded dumbly. He didn’t know what to say.

The girl wiped her nose on her jacket sleeve. With great deliberation, she took a stick of chewing gum from a pocket, unwrapped it and folded it into her mouth. She chewed for a moment thoughtfully. “OK, Harold O’Shaughnessy,” she said. “You can tag along with us. We’re heading into the Wilds to meet some companions for a job. We’ll decide what to do with you then. But I’ve got to warn you, it’s not easy ground to cover. And we move fast. So, if you can’t keep up...” She shrugged, then stepped over the body of the nearest Tainted and walked off across the glade.

O’Shaughnessy stood watching her. His jaw was a little slack.

“Don’t worry,” the boy said, “she said the same sort of thing to me once, too. Still, we’d better follow her, or we *will* get left behind. But I see you have a question.”

“Have I?”

“You want to know our names.”

“Oh, yes.” O’Shaughnessy suddenly felt immensely tired.
“Yes, that’s right... I do.”

“And I’ll gladly tell you. Mind you, it’s possible you’ve already heard of us,” the boy said, smiling. “We’re quite well known round here.”

