

Wayland's Revenge by Lesley Lodge

A Historical Crime Thriller set in Seventeenth Century England.

Sample Chapter

Chapter One

1647, Forest Heath, England

With King Charles I now captured, the Parliamentary forces are confident of victory

A man lay howling on the spikey stubble of a field. His arm was contorted. Blood streamed down his face. Three ravens strutted nearby, oblivious, slowing now and then to peck at the dry red earth. A young woman was walking slowly away, bent over in pain, towards a cottage beyond the field. A second man, Wayland, sat silent on the ground nearby. He too was wounded. The tattered strings of braid still hanging from their uniforms, the leather coats both men had cast aside would tell any observer that both men were – or had been – soldiers on the Parliamentary side. Both were injured and yet all conflict had ended since the King's capture.

Wayland heard the horsemen before he saw them, a good three fields away. At that distance, he couldn't tell much about them. He did know without doubt, though, that they would bring trouble. The only question was, which sort of trouble. Still he stayed seated, clenching and unclenching his fists while large bruises deepened in colour across his hands and face. The sound of hoof beats grew and grew. The ravens took off in leisurely flight, wings flapping slowly. Wayland remained in that exact position even as the cavalymen surrounded him.

‘What...’ asked their commander, ‘in God’s name has been going on?’

The man on the ground spluttered. ‘That... that bastard...’ was all he managed to say before pain reduced him to a stifled groaning. Seconds passed. The commander dismounted. Seeing this, the man used his good arm to point at Wayland. The commander turned to Wayland. Now he saw the bruises.

‘Have you not had enemy enough to fight without taking on each other?’ he asked. Getting no reply, he threw his reins to the nearest cavalryman and strode over to Wayland.

Wayland stared back at him. ‘There is still right and wrong,’ he said, ‘whether there’s a war or no.’

‘That’s as maybe – but you? Justice is not for the likes of you to give. You are neither a commander nor a magistrate.’

‘And neither a commander nor a magistrate was present here to stop a wrong,’ Wayland replied.

The man on the ground waved his good arm. ‘Wait,’ he said, ‘wrong? I did nothing wrong.’

Wayland looked over in the direction the woman had walked but she was gone. ‘If he did no wrong,’ he said, ‘then ‘tis only because he was stopped.’

‘Listen to me, both of you. In the absence of your own commander, I am taking command of this situation for now and I demand that you tell me what happened,’ the commander said.

The man on the ground opened his mouth but thought better of it. Wayland said nothing. The horses fidgeted. The commander looked around. His men were looking bored too now. Then he saw the woman hobbling off, still just in sight. He grasped

straightaway that Wayland must have taken exception to the other soldier raping – to trying to rape – the woman. He turned to Wayland. ‘So that’s how it is. Well, *I* can inform *you* that injuring a fellow soldier,’ he said, ‘that is a charge. So I don’t need you to tell me what happened. I can see him,’ he a thumb towards the other man, ‘and I can see that he’s badly injured and you will have to answer to that.’

Wayland finally got to his feet. ‘He’ll live,’ he said, looking at the man’s arm, ‘dislocation.’

‘Dislocation? What do you mean?’

‘His arm. Not broken. Just – in the wrong place,’ said Wayland, ‘and as it happens, I can help him.’ He strode over and before anyone could stop him he had inserted both his hands into the right side of the man’s coat.

‘Breathe,’ he said, ‘breathe before I count to two. One...two.’ He jerked the man’s shoulder.

The man let out a scream that was pure animal. There was silence for a moment while all eyes were fixed on him. His arm was no longer at an odd angle. He let out a low whimper and colour flooded back into his face.

‘How?’ began the commander, ‘how did you do that?’

‘Why, more like,’ muttered one of the soldiers nearby to the fellow beside him, ‘why bother to help the bastard?’

‘Well,’ said Wayland, ‘as I say, there’s more to life than this stupid war. A man’s body doesn’t work so very differently from a horse’s. A blacksmith – that’s me. That’s my trade. Horses are my life.’

Later, back at his own regiment’s encampment, despite a convincing outward calm, Wayland did begin to worry that he would likely face discipline. Army rules were set

and he had, he knew, made matters worse with his continued refusal to explain his actions. Much as Wayland despised what the man's treatment of a woman villager, he had after all succeeded in preventing her actual rape. Wayland considered the crime – if it merited such a label – already sufficiently for, in pain. And a common soldier's key to survival in these times relied on unwritten rules and these all reinforced the view that soldiers stuck together against officers.

The next morning, however, brought about a surprise change in Wayland's fortunes – or so it seemed at the time. Throughout the long months of his service in the war, there had been days of intense fear, days of defeat and days of victory. More often there had also been days of boredom. But there had never been a day like this one. What woke him early on this day was the sound of excited chatter.

'I can go then? Just leave, go home?' he heard a man ask.

'Aye,' someone replied, 'did you not listen? The King is captive, held fast for sure this time. They say Fairfax himself has him. Men like us, men who had no choice but to serve in this army, we are just another cost to them now.'

Wayland dressed quickly and joined the group of men outside. He stood at the back but he'd been spotted. 'Of course, that goes double for you, troublemaker,' said the last speaker. The other men turned to look at Wayland.

'Aye!' said one, 'I certainly wouldn't waste my time waiting if I were you. Which, thank the Lord, I am not.'

'Wait? Why would *anyone* wait if we can go now?' Wayland asked.

'The monies they promised us,' the soldier replied, with a smile that Wayland failed to notice, 'or are you so deep in trouble that money's no concern to you?'

‘Nay,’ Wayland said, ‘but I’m not that naive. Have any of you been paid these last few months?’

Many shook their heads. All were silent now.

‘So, if they didn’t pay me my dues before, I see no cause to expect aught now, that’s for sure. You can wait and hope for your pay. I’ll be going now, back home. Unless they stop me.’

The news was spreading fast throughout the encampment now. ‘Let’s hope our women back home have followed a more faithful path than *some* men...’ he heard someone say. This comment was aimed not at Wayland but at a couple of the men nearby. It raised a laugh. Wayland didn’t laugh. He never doubted his own wife for one instant but still he felt a sudden chill of unease. He knew their village had not been touched by war. But he also knew that even in peaceful times life could be full of dangers, hazards – and evil men. Even more impatient now to leave and hoping no one else would be heading his way, Wayland hurried to stuff his few belongings into saddlebags. He reclaimed his old mare from the supplies and baggage section and set off home.

At first, as the mare picked her way slowly over the clods of earth cast up by cavalry horses, Wayland felt his mind empty of its day-to-day concerns. This moment had seemed an eternity away. Now that it had actually arrived, he could barely believe it. He was free to go home. Home to Rebecca, his wife. And to Jonathan, his son, who must be, what, eleven now? Back to his everyday life as a blacksmith. No more fighting, no more orders. Instead, he hoped, a calm existence to look forward to, though he did feel a twinge through his spine when he recalled the backache that went with his trade, blacksmithing.

His journey home took him across part of Suffolk before he reached Essex, his home county. From the outset he marvelled at the contrasts: while some places seemed untouched by the war; others were empty, more like ghosts' towns. He skirted the bigger towns, fearing some challenge as a deserter from those who might not have heard of the peace agreement and slept in the fields at night. The word when he left the army was that Essex had been mostly saved from the chaos of battle, being safely on the Parliamentary side – the winning side, as it had turned out. He hadn't anticipated, though, the neglect that showed in the fields, the crops outgrown by weeds. Of course, he supposed, like himself, most men would have been called to war while harvest times had come and gone.

He was some five miles away from home, past Fyfield, when he began to recognise specific field structures for certain. Then his emotions broke through, twisting and churning as excitement mixed with apprehension. His senses seemed to sharpen. When he rounded the last corner into the road to the little hamlet where his home and smithy were, the very quietness reassured. Trouble would make a noise – wouldn't it? His heart jerked out a loud beat as he caught his first glimpse of the low, stone building that was his smithy. At first, everything looked in place. It took him a while to notice what was missing: the smoke. Of course, he thought, Rebecca wouldn't run the furnace while he was away. But then he realised, of course, there *should* be a fire going, for bread, for broth and so on. A small fire, yes, but you'd always see some smoke. He kicked his mare into a trot up to the door, tied her there and dashed in. He ran through the smithy, into the living area, barging at each door, shouting. No one answered. There was no one there. He yelled again, called her name. Nothing. Slowing to think, he checked the pantry. Flour was scattered across the floor. There was no other food. He thought again, and then checked for waste. Surely there would

be food left, he thought, or rotten leavings, if... if Rebecca and Jonathan had been compelled to leave suddenly or – but he stopped himself, refusing to think through any alternatives.

It occurred to him then that he hadn't yet checked his animal pens at the back, behind the smithy. When he'd left, over a year ago, there'd been one old pig and half a dozen hens. The iron gate clanked and creaked as he opened it but he could swear he also heard a rustling. He could see no pig, no hens. Nor could he smell any animal. He pulled a stout stick out of the fencing and moved across the pen, thwacking the stick down on to the deep straw. He felt it hit a lump of something. There was a grunt of pain. A straw-covered something shot out and scrambled across the yard. It stopped at the fence and shook. As the straw fell away from the creature, Wayland recognised it. 'Jonathan!' he cried, 'son! It's me, your father.'

Wayland scooped his son into his arms. He stood there, just stroking the boy's head as he would a nervous horse. But however much he soothed, however much he asked, he could not get the boy to speak a single word.

Wayland checked the smithy and its living areas once again then put the boy to bed. He set off, grim-faced, to find his wife. From the state of the boy he knew there would be bad news but he did not doubt that he would find an answer.

In the end, it took over three hours before he got any kind of an answer. Door after door, he found no one in – or at least, no one came to the door. Sometimes he thought he heard whisperings behind a door but no amount of pounding would bring anyone out to face him.

Desperate, he went to check the church. There, next to the church, at last a door did

open. A very aged woman he knew only slightly stood looking out from her hovel. 'Ah, Blacksmith,' she said 'I always guessed I'd have you a-knocking one day. I suppose no-one else has the courage to tell you.'

'Tell me what? Where's my wife, Rebecca?' he asked, though her face told him she was dead, 'I have to know. What happened to her?'

'It was all lies of course, but there wasn't one who would say so,' she said.

'What? What was all lies? What happened? Don't give me riddles. Tell me outright.' Wayland wanted to take her by the shoulders and shake the answer out of her.

She looked around, fearful of being overheard. 'They killed her. Took her for a witch.'

Wayland heard a scream, a tormented, loud scream. It seemed a long way off. He didn't realize at first that it was his scream.

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