

The Meadow

A Story by Richard
Photos by Bad Dog
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This is a story about a small patch of land on a hillside in eastern France. It is a patch of land which we Faeries have the privilege to care for, explore and play in; a sacred patch of nature which we also have the honour and responsibility to love, nurture and care for. It is an amazingly complex, interwoven tapestry of hundreds of interdependent species of plants, insects and animals which has been evolving for 12000 years. But this is just the story of the meadow, the story of Folleterre's woodlands will have to wait for another day.



Oxlip, Marsh Valerian
and Wild Strawberry

Chapter 1: Before the Faeries

Around 12000 years ago Folleterre was near the edge of the Alpine ice sheet, covered in hundreds of metres of ice and looking out over bleak tundra in the lowlands below. But this, the most recent ice age, was beginning to come to a close and as temperatures warmed across Europe, the Alpine glaciers retreated. As the ice melted at Folleterre, plants slowly returned to the bare rock and scree slopes. At first just a few stunted flowers and grasses barely clinging to life between the stones, then lush flower-strewn grasslands clothed the hills, slowly building soil as decayed leaves accumulated over centuries. At last, with temperatures warming further, the first trees arrive – low scrubby Willows (*Salix*) and Birches (*Betula*) give way to Pines (*Pinus*) and Firs (*Abies*) and eventually broadleaf forests flourish once more, with Beech (*Fagus*), Oak (*Quercus*), Hornbeam (*Carpinus*), Maple (*Acer*), Linden (*Tilia*), Hazel (*Corylus*) and several others.

This forest dominated the landscape for several thousand years, but there were also large grasslands amongst the trees. Roaming herds of deer, bison, aurochs, wild horses and other large herbivores grazed these grasslands intensively, stopping young trees from growing and allowing large areas to stay open and sunny. These grasslands supported a unique diversity of grasses and flowers alongside an amazing variety of insects and invertebrates in turn providing food for many birds, mammals and amphibians. In total, hundreds of species formed a complex interdependent web in this beautiful and lush ecosystem.

Then, around 6000 years ago, the first Neolithic farmers spread throughout Europe. At Folleterre, domestic livestock (including cows, sheep and goats) eventually replaced the wild herbivores. This increased grazing led to more grassland, with forests probably mostly restricted to the steepest slopes and infertile soils. Eventually a settled pattern of agriculture developed. In order to feed livestock through the winter, the most fertile land would be managed as meadows. Grasses and wildflowers were allowed to grow tall every spring, being mown for hay at the height of summer. This was carefully dried and stored until winter, when it was used to feed livestock when the grass in the pastures was covered with deep



Lords and Ladies
aka Cuckoo-pint

snow. For thousands of years, these meadows supported a unique, kaleidoscopic diversity of hundreds of beautiful wildflowers threaded with a tapestry of thousands of amazing insects, which in turn provided food for many species of birds. But this mesmerising kaleidoscope of diversity was dependent on the farming cycle. Without regular mowing or grazing, the meadows would soon be covered by brambles or trees. With the wild herbivores hunted to near extinction, the unique diversity of the natural grasslands would disappear without frequent human intervention.

Then came the trees

Our meadow supported this extraordinary diversity of life for thousands of years, but then everything changed in the 20th century. The economics of farming changed and sheep and cattle were no longer kept in these remote hills and valleys. As grazing and hay-making declined, the meadows became overgrown as vigorous grasses and brambles spread, leaving little room for the wildflowers and the insects that depend on them. After millennia of thriving, colourful, buzzing diversity, the meadow started to grow dull and monotonous. In response to the economic decline, the French government gave grants for farmers to plant dense monocultures of commercial forest trees. As these trees grew, they shaded out the grasses and flowers and the land turned to a dull, uniform gloom. This wasn't a thriving natural woodland of deciduous trees, full of spring flowers and buzzing with myriad insects, but a monoculture crop of evergreen conifers, unfamiliar to the spirits of this land. These uniform, planted rows were more like a field of wheat than a natural woodland - planted only for profit, ignoring the ways of the flowers and creatures that once called this place home. The dense trees shaded almost everything beneath them and almost all the plants and insects were lost. Only a few insects lived on the introduced trees and the cacophony of bird song softened as only a few bird species could thrive in this new monoculture. Luckily, one small patch remained - the farmer continued to graze his few cows on the little patch now called Venus Hill and some of the wildflowers and insects were able to hang on, just about surviving in this tiny fragment of meadow.

Chapter 2: Arrival of the Faeries



Common Dog-violet

When Faeries first arrived at Folleterre, this was the landscape they inherited – young plantations of dense conifers with dense shade. A few small patches of open grassland persisted in the surrounding countryside, but the former glory of thriving, diverse meadows was all but lost.

Then came the machines.

In 2012 the forestry machines cut all the trees. They left behind a barren landscape, scarred where the heavy machines churned up the soil, and strewn with enormous amounts of brash (twigs, sticks, leaves and all the parts of the trees which had no economic value). The hydrology was disrupted, with streams and water flows diverted. There was terrible erosion, with bare soil washed away by winter storms whilst other places languished under huge piles of sticks, logs and pine needles.

We Faeries made money from this devastation: a few thousand Euros in exchange for all the trees. A devastated hillside, but we had funds to help pay the mortgage, complete the septic tank system and build a new car park. Does this give us a moral responsibility to help the hillside recover: to reduce erosion and help the meadows and forests return and thrive on this damaged landscape? Slowly life is starting to return, with grasses and flowers growing on the bare soil. Tree seeds arrived on the wind and in the droppings of birds that had been feasting on fruits and berries. After decades under the shade of the monoculture forest, the meadows and diverse broad-leaved woodlands are just starting to return.

Chapter 3: Beltane 2015

Most of the Faeries are over at the Prairie, dancing ribbons around the new May Pole and ritually burning last year's pole. But today I felt drawn to this small patch of hillside instead. The previous week we had worked together to move the sticks and brash into piles and cut back all the brambles. Today I'm slowly working over the land, with a rake in my hands, teasing out the remaining brash and tangled old stems and leaves. I feel a strong connection with this patch of earth, as though I am gently combing his unkempt hair, removing tangles and split ends which have accumulated over years of neglect. Though some areas are bare and others overgrown with vigorous Bent-grasses (*Agrostis spp.*), already there are many plants flowering: Dog-violets (*Viola canina*), Oxlips (*Primula elatior*), Wood-anemones (*Anemone nemorosa*), Lady's-smock (*Cardamine pratensis*), Lady's-mantle (*Alchemilla xanthochlora*) and here or there the occasional Marsh Valerian or Greater Stitchwort (*Stellaria holostea*). Many others are just low mounds of leaves, ready to burst into a riot of colour over the coming months.

As I undertake this work, I feel love and respect for this land and its spirit feels strong. I can feel the *Genius Loci*, the *terroir*. I imagine the wild forests with their herds of fierce Aurochs and Lynx quietly hiding in the shadows. I can feel the generations of farmers who worked tirelessly to maintain the meadows over the millennia. This land is rich and alive.

As I gently rake the brash and detritus, I also think very practically of the work needed over the coming years in order to restore this patch of land to the beautiful, complex meadow it was before the dark few decades of the trees and the machines. Raking out the old leaves, sticks and stems is an act of creation, imagining a brighter future. This raking and clearing the meadow has three main aims:

Firstly, it will make the land easier to mow in the summer, finally bringing it back into the pattern of growing, cutting and grazing which maintained such vibrant diversity in the centuries before the trees.

Secondly, it removes some of the accumulated nutrients which would encourage the growth of vigorous grasses and brambles at the expense of wildflowers.

Finally, it opens up 'regeneration niches', small patches of bare soil between the grasses where wildflower seeds can germinate, increasing diversity. With a little help, some of the seeds from Venus Hill, that precious fragment of ancient meadow, will find small patches of ground to grow.



Cuckoo-flower and
Opposite-leaved Golden Saxifrage

Chapter 4: Into the future

Over the next few years we will hopefully see this meadow come back to life as we continue to manage the land, following in the footsteps of the generations of farmers who came before us. By mowing and caring for the land every year, we can restore this beautiful and diverse patch of nature where plants, insects and animals can thrive, and Faeries can enjoy the beautiful wildflowers and sunny, open, lush spaces to frolic and play. But we've still got quite a bit of work in order to undo the damage caused by the trees and machines: piles of brash need to be moved to the house or firepit, to be used for kindling and firewood; stumps need to be cut or burnt out to stop them blunting our scythes when we mow; brambles need to be regularly cut, pulled or dug out; areas churned up by the machines need to be carefully levelled; and every year the meadows need to be mown several times from late summer to autumn.

If you want to be a part of transforming and restoring these meadows, there are plenty of ways to get involved. We'll be looking after our prairies and meadows at the Summer Community Week 2015, and there's also plenty to do whenever you visit Folleterre this year. Register now for the Summer Community Week, or contact Richard if you want any advice or ideas for working on the land.