

# THE SEVEN ARTS



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# Powers of the Air

By J. D. Beresford

**I** FORESAW the danger that threatened him. He was so ignorant, and his sight had been almost destroyed in the city streets. A trustful ignorance is the beginning of wisdom, but these townspeople are conceited with their foolish book-learning; and reading darkens the eyes of the mind.

I began to warn him in early October when the gales roar far up in the sky. They are harmless then; they tear at the ricks and the slate roofs, and waste themselves in stripping the trees; but we are safe until the darkness comes.

I took him to the crown of the stubble land, and turned him with his back to the dark thread of the sea. I pointed to the rooks tumbling about the sky like scattered leaves that sported in a mounting wind.

"We are past the turn," I said. "The black time is coming."

He stood thoughtlessly watching the ecstatic rooks. "Is it some game they play?" he asked.

I shook my head. "They belong to the darkness," I told him.

He looked at me in that slightly forbearing way of his, and said, "Another of your superstitions?"

I was silent for a moment. I stared down at the texture of black fields ploughed for winter wheat, and thought of all the writing that lay before us under that wild October hill, all the clear signs that he could never be taught to read.

"Knowledge," I said. I was afraid for him, and I wished to save him. He had been penned in that little world of the

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town like a caged gull. He had been blinded by staring at the boards of his coop.

He smiled condescendingly. "You are charmingly primitive still," he said. "Do you worship the sun in secret, and make propitiatory offerings to the thunder?"

I sighed, knowing that if I would save him I must try to reach his mind by the ear, by the dull and clumsy means of language. That is the fetish of these townspeople. They have no wisdom, only a little recognition of those things that can be described in printed or spoken words. And I dreaded the effort of struggling with the infirmity of this obstinate blind youth.

"I came out here to warn you," I began.

"Against what?" he asked.

"The forces that have power in the black time," I said. "Even now they are beginning to gather strength. In a month it will not be safe for you to go out on the cliffs after sunset. You may not believe me, but won't you accept my warning in good faith?"

He patronized me with his smile. "What are these forces?" he asked.

That is the manner of these book-folk. They ask always for names. If they can but label a thing in a word or in a volume of description they are satisfied that they have achieved knowledge. They bandy these names of theirs as a talisman.

"Who knows?" I replied. "We have learnt their power. Call them what you will, you cannot change them by any baptism."

"Well, what do they *do*?" he said, still tolerant. "Have you ever seen them?" he added, as if he would trick me.

I had, but how could I describe them to him? Can one explain the colors of autumn to a man born blind? Or is there any language which will set out the play of a breaker among the rocks? How then could I talk to him

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of that which I had known only in the fear of my soul?

"Have you ever seen the wind?" I said.

He laughed. "Well, then, tell me your evidence," he replied.

I searched my mind for something that he might regard as evidence. "Men," I said, "used to believe that the little birds, the finches and the tits, rushed blindly at the lanterns of the light-houses, and dashed themselves to death as a moth will dash itself into the candle. But now they know that the birds only seek a refuge near the light, and that they will rest till dawn on the perches that are built for them."

"Quite true," he agreed. "And what then?"

"The little birds are prey to the powers of the air when the darkness comes," I said; "and their only chance of life is to come within the beam of the protecting light. And when they could find no place to rest, they hovered and fluttered until they were weak with the ache of flight, and fell a little into the darkness; then in panic and despair they fled back and overshot their mark."

"But gulls . . . ." he began.

"A few," I interrupted him. "A few, although they also belong to the wild and the darkness. They fall in chasing the little birds who, like us, are a quarry."

"A pretty fable," he said; but I saw that the shadow of a doubt had fallen across him, and when he asked me another question I would not reply . . .

I took him to the door at ten o'clock that night and made him listen to the revels in the upper air. Below it was almost still and very dark, for the moon was near the new, and the clouds were traveling North in diligent masses that would presently bring rain.

"Do you hear them?" I asked.

He shivered slightly, and pretended that the air was cold . . .

As the nights drew in, I began to hope that he had taken

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my warning to heart. He did not speak of it, but he took his walks while the sun edged across its brief arc of the sky.

I took comfort in the thought that some dim sense of vision was still left to him; and one afternoon when the black time was almost come, I walked with him on the cliffs. I meant then to test him; to discover if, indeed, some feeble remnant of sight was yet his.

The wind had hidden itself that day, but I knew that it lurked in the grey depths that hung on the sea's horizon. Its outrunners streaked the falling blue of the sky with driven spirits of white cloud; and the long swell of the rising sea cried out with fear as it fled, breaking, to its death.

I said no word to him, then, of the coming peril. We walked to the cliff's edge and watched the thousand runnels of foam that laced the blackness of Trescore rock with milk-white threads, as those driven rollers cast themselves against the land and burst moon-high in their last despair.

We saw the darkness creeping toward us out of the far distance, and then we turned from the sea and I saw how the coming shadow was already quenching the hills. All the earth was hardening itself to await the night.

"God! what a lonely place!" he said.

It seemed lonely to him, but I saw the little creeping movements among the black roots of the furze. To me the place seemed over-populous. Nevertheless I took it as a good sign that he had found a sense of loneliness; it is a sense that often precedes the coming of knowledge . . .

And when the darkness of winter had come I thought he was safe. He was always back in the house by sunset and he went little to the cliffs. But now and again he would look at me with something of defiance in his face, as if he braced himself to meet an argument.

I gave him no encouragement to speak. I believed that no knowledge could come to him by that way, that no words of mine could help him. And I was right. But he forced

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speech upon me. He faced me one afternoon in the depths of the black time. He was stiffened to oppose me.

"It's absurd," he said, "to pretend a kind of superior wisdom. If you can't give me some reason for this superstition of yours I must go out and test it for myself."

I knew my own feebleness, and I tried to prevaricate by saying: "I gave you reasons."

"They will all bear at least two explanations," he said.

"At least wait," I pleaded. "You are so young."

He was a little softened by my weakness but he was resolute. He meant to teach me, to prove that he was right. He lifted his head proudly and smiled.

"Youth is the age of courage and experiment," he boasted.

"Of recklessness and curiosity," was my amendment.

"I am going," he said.

"You will never come back," I warned him.

"But if I do come back," he said, "will you admit that I am right?"

I would not accept so foolish a challenge. "Some escape," I said.

"I will go every night until you are convinced," he returned. "Before the winter is over, you shall come with me. I will cure you of your fear."

I was angry then; and I turned my back upon him. I heard him go out and made no effort to hinder him. I sat and brooded and consoled myself with the thought that he would surely return at dusk.

I waited until sunset and he had not come back.

I went to the window and saw that a dying yellow still shone feebly in the west; and I watched it as I have watched the last flicker of a lantern when a friend makes his way home across the hill.

Already the horrified clouds were leaping up in terror from the edge of the sea, coming with outflung arms that sprawled across the hollow sky.

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I went into the hall and found my hat; and I stood there in the twilight listening for the sound of a footstep. I could not believe that he would stay on the cliff after the darkness had come. I hesitated and listened while the shadows crept together in the corners of the hall.

He had taunted me with my cowardice and I knew I must go and seek him. But before I opened the door I waited again and strained my ears so eagerly for the click and shriek of the gate that I created the sound in my own mind. And yet, as I heard it, I knew it for a phantasm.

At last I went out suddenly and fiercely.

A gust of wind shook me before I had reached the gate, and the air was full of intimidating sound. I heard the cry of the driven clouds, and the awful shout of the pursuers mingled with the drumming and thudding of the endless companies that hurried across the width of heaven.

I dared not look up. I clutched my head with my arms, and ran stumbling to the foot of the path that climbs to the height of the undefended cliff.

I tried to call him, but my voice was caught in the rout of air; my shout was torn from me and dispersed among the atoms of scuttling foam that huddled a moment among the rocks before they leaped to dissolution.

I stooped to the lee of the singing furze. I dared go no further. Beyond was all the riot, where the mad sport took strange shapes of soaring whirlpools and sudden draughts, and wonderful calms that suckingly enticed the unknowing to the cliff's edge.

I knew that it would be useless to seek him now. The scream of the gale had mounted unendurably; he could not be still alive up there in the midst of that reeling fury.

I crept back to the road and the shelter of the cutting, and then I fled to my house.

For a long hour I sat over the fire seeking some peace of mind. I blamed myself most bitterly that I had not hindered

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him. I might have given way; have pretended conviction, or, at least, some sympathy with his rash and foolish ignorance. But presently I found consolation in the thought that his fate had always been inevitable. What availed any effort of mine against the unquestionable forces that had pronounced his doom? I listened to the thudding procession that marched through the upper air, and to the shrieking of the spirits that come down to torture and destroy the things of earth; and I knew that no effort of mine could have saved him. . . .

And when the outer door banged, and I heard his footstep in the hall, I believed that he was appearing to me at the moment of his death; but when he came into the room with shining eyes and bright cheeks, laughing and tossing the hair back from his forehead, I was curiously angry.

"Where have you been?" I asked. "I went out to the cliff to find you, and thought you were dead."

"You came to the cliffs?" he said.

"To the foot of the cliff," I confessed.

"Ah! you must never go further than that in the black time," he said.

"Then you believe me now?" I asked.

He smiled. "I believe that *you* would be in danger up there tonight," he said, "because you believe in the powers of the air, and you are afraid."

He stood in the doorway, braced by his struggle with the wind; and his young eyes were glowing with the consciousness of discovery and new knowledge.

Yet he cannot deny that I showed him the way.