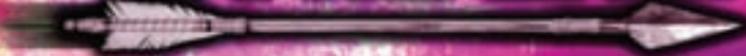


The Ranger's Apprentice *Ranger's Apprentice*

RANGERS' APPRENTICE



THE LOST
STORIES

JOHN FLANAGAN

Ranger's Apprentice *The*



THE LOST
STORIES

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STORIES
JOHN FLANAGAN



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This book is dedicated to those Ranger's Apprentice fans around the world who have made the last seven years so enjoyable for me. The stories that follow are in response to the questions you have asked me over the years.

Thank you all.

FOREST

CASTLE KEEP

GREAT
HALL

DRAWBRIDGE

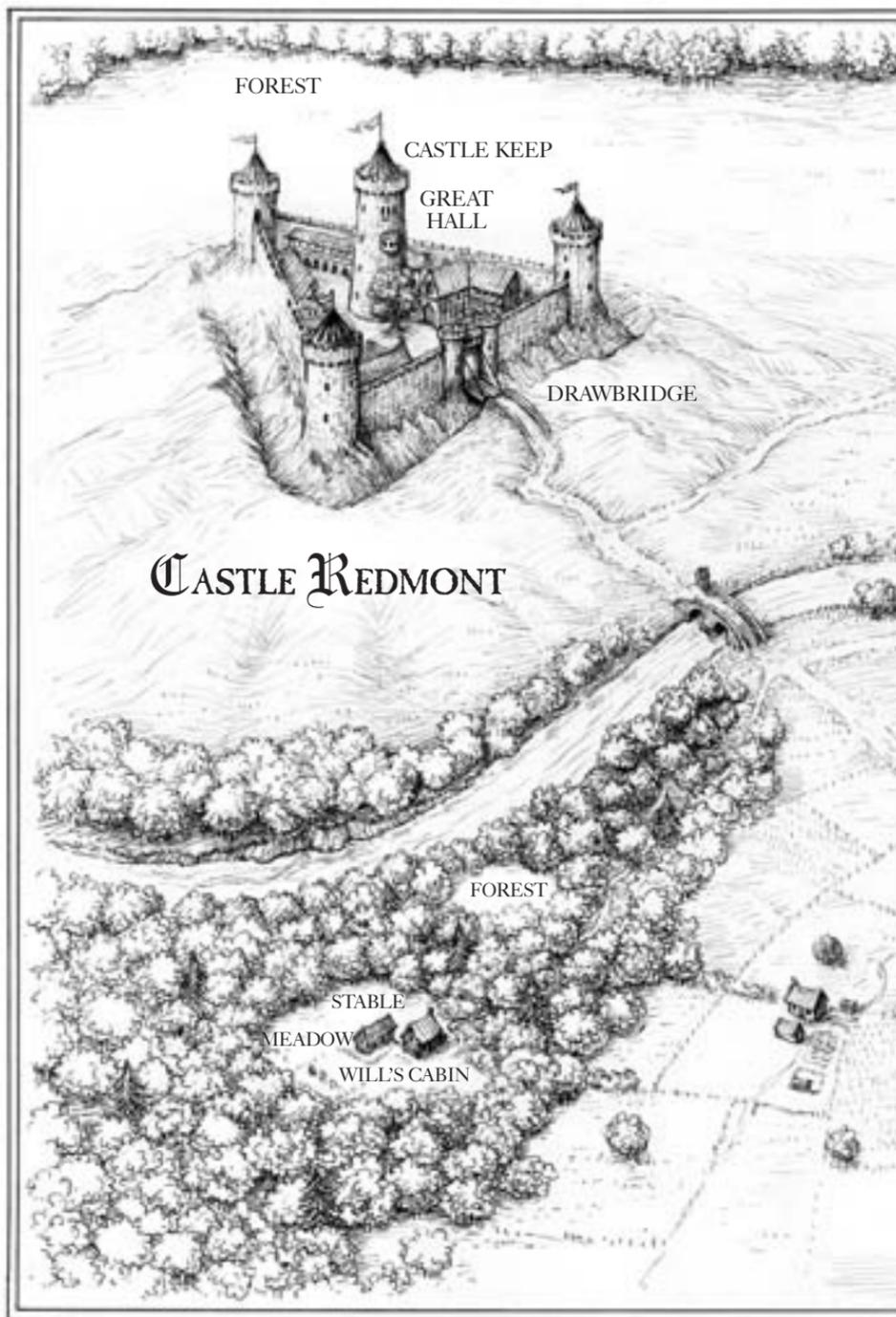
CASTLE REDMONT

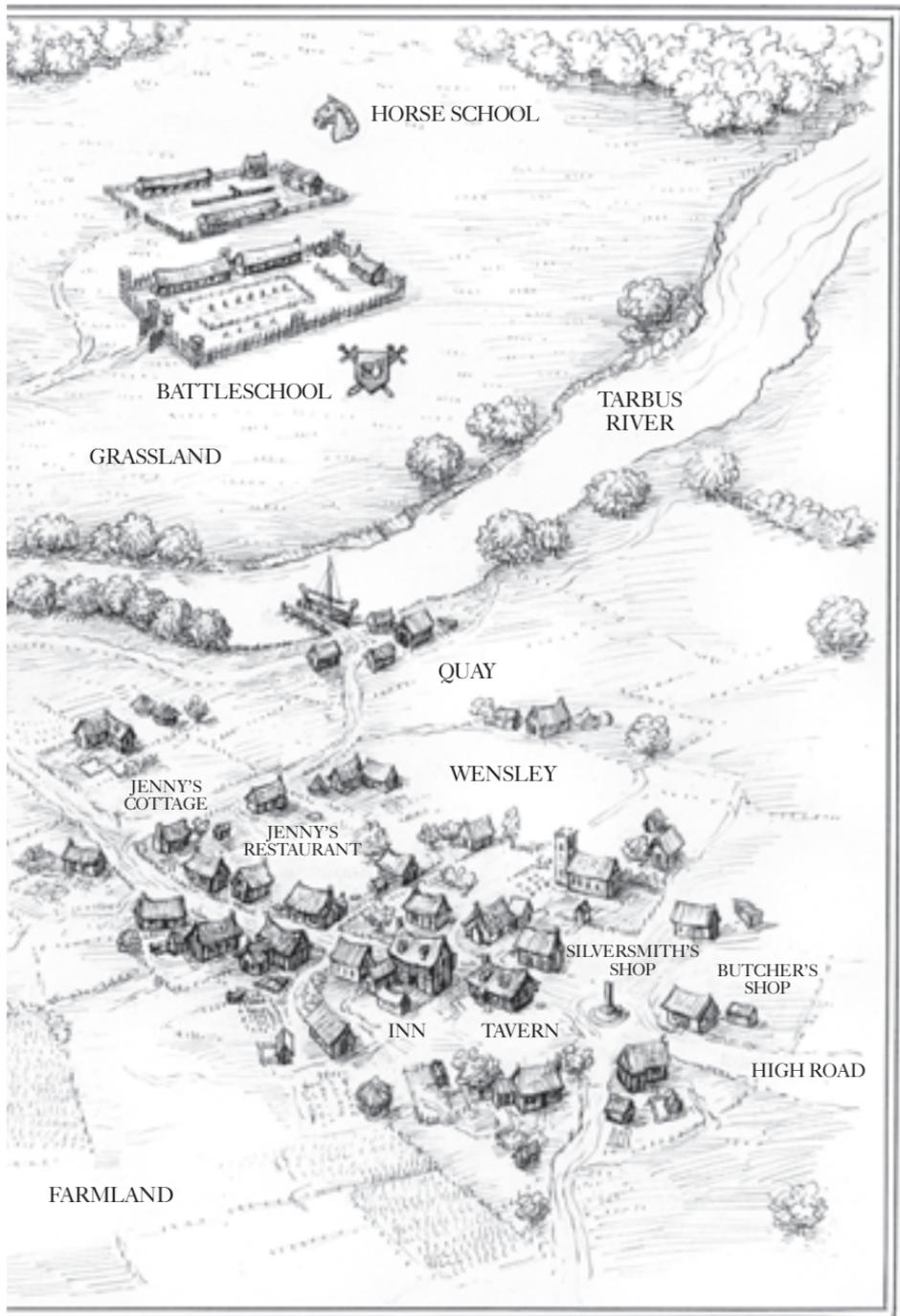
FOREST

STABLE

MEADOW

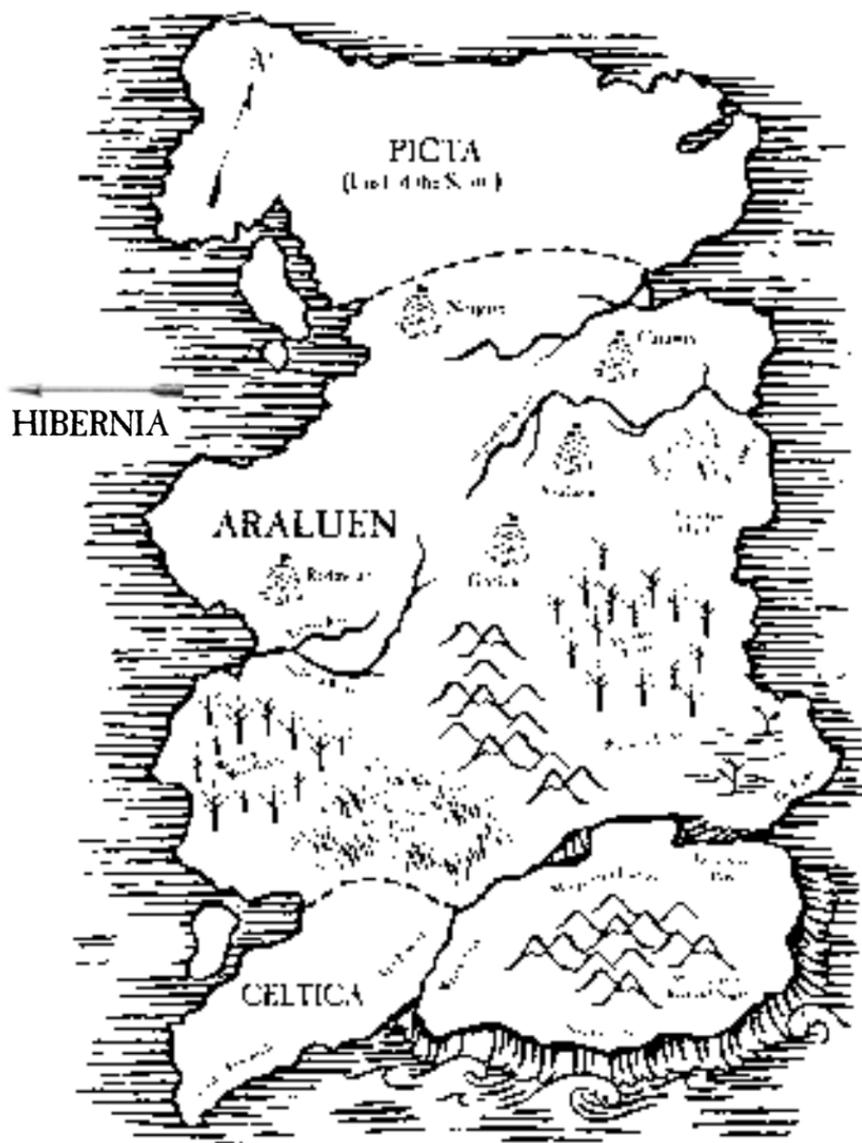
WILL'S CABIN





ARALUEN, PICTA AND CELTICA

YEAR 613 COMMON ERA





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FOREWORD



Redman County
The Republic of Aralan States
(formerly the mediaeval Kingdom of Araluen)
July 1896

H Professor Giles MacFarlane groaned softly as he eased his aching back. He was getting too old to remain crouched for long periods like this, gently whisking dust away from the excavated ground before him as he sought to release yet another artefact from the earth that had held it captive for so long.

He and his team had come upon this ruined castle several years ago. They had mapped the outline of its triangular main walls – an unusual shape for a castle. The jagged stump of the ancient keep tower stood in the middle of the space they had cleared. The collapsed tower was barely four metres high now. But even in its ruined state, MacFarlane could see that it had been a formidable building.

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Their first digging season had been spent determining the outer limits of the building. The following year, they had begun a series of cross trenches, digging down to discover what lay beneath the build-up of earth and rock and detritus that had collected over twelve hundred years.

Now, in the third season, they were down to the fine work, and beginning to unearth the ancient treasures of the dig. A belt buckle here. An arrowhead there. A knife. A cracked ladle. Jewellery whose design and general appearance dated to around the middle of the tenth century in the Common Era.

On one momentous day, they had unearthed a granite plaque, carved with the likeness of a tusked boar. It was that piece that had identified the castle beyond doubt.

‘This was Castle Redmont,’ MacFarlane had told his hushed assistants.

Castle Redmont. Contemporary of the fabled Castle Araluen. Seat of Baron Arald, known as one of the legendary King Duncan’s staunchest retainers. If Redmont had really existed, then surely all the tales of its people might have a basis in fact. Perhaps, MacFarlane thought, hoping beyond hope, he would find proof that the mysterious Rangers of Araluen had actually existed. It would be a staggeringly significant discovery.

But as this season had progressed and the trenches had been dug deeper still, there had been no find as important as that first one. MacFarlane and his people had to be content with the normal fare of excavations – nondescript metal tools and ornaments, pottery shards and remnants of cooking vessels.

FOREWORD

They searched and dug and brushed, hoping every day that they would discover their personal Holy Grail. But as the summer digging season passed, MacFarlane had begun to lose hope. For this year, at least.

‘Professor! Professor!’

He stood, rubbing his back again, as he heard his name being called. One of the young volunteers who augmented his paid staff from the university was running through the excavation, waving as she saw him. He frowned. An archaeological dig was no place to be moving so recklessly. A slight misstep could ruin weeks of patient work. Then he recognised her as Audrey, one of his favourites, and his expression softened. She was young. The young were often reckless.

She drew level with him and stood, shoulders heaving, as she recovered her breath.

‘Well, Audrey, what is it?’ he said, after giving her a little time.

Still panting, she pointed down the hill towards the River Tarb.

‘Across the river,’ she said. ‘Among a tangle of trees and bushes. We’ve found the outline of an ancient cabin.’

He shrugged, not excited by this revelation. ‘There was a village down there,’ he said. ‘It’s not surprising.’ But Audrey was shaking her head and grasped his arm to lead him down the hill.

‘It’s way outside the village limits,’ she said. ‘It was on its own. You must come and see it!’

MacFarlane hesitated. It would be a long walk downhill, and an even longer one back up. Then he shrugged mentally. Enthusiasm like Audrey’s should be encouraged,

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he thought, not stifled. He allowed the girl to lead him down the rough zigzag path.

They crossed the old bridge that spanned the river. Never one to miss a chance to teach, he indicated to the girl how the supports at either end were older than the middle span.

‘The middle section is much newer,’ he said. ‘These bridges were designed so that the centre span could be removed or destroyed in the event of an attack.’

Normally, Audrey would have hung on his every word. The professor was a personal hero for her. But today she was in a fever of excitement to show him her find.

‘Yes, yes,’ she said distractedly, urging him on. He smiled indulgently as she tugged at his sleeve, leading him away from the remains of the ancient village. The going became tougher as they entered the forest and had to make their way along a narrow path, through the close-growing large trees and unkempt undergrowth. Finally, Audrey turned off the path and, bending double, forced a way through a tangle of vines and creepers. MacFarlane followed awkwardly, then stood in some amazement as he found himself in a small clearing, surrounded by ancient oaks and more modern dogwood.

‘How on earth did you find this?’ he asked and Audrey blushed.

‘Oh . . . I . . . er . . . needed a little privacy . . . you know,’ she said awkwardly.

He nodded, waving a hand. ‘Say no more.’

She led him forward and, looking where she pointed, his practised eye could see the unmistakable outline of a small hut or cabin. Most of the structure had rotted away,

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of course. But there were still a few vestiges of the upright columns remaining.

‘Oak,’ he said. ‘It’ll last for centuries.’

The outlines of the rooms and dividing walls could still be made out – faint signs imprinted into the ground itself over the centuries, even though the original structure was long gone. And the flattened, level ground of the interior floor was all too obvious.

‘There may have been a stable at the rear,’ she said, her voice hushed in this ancient place. ‘I found a few metal pieces – bits and what might have been harness buckles. And the remains of a bucket.’

MacFarlane turned in a slow circle, studying the dim outline of the building.

‘It’s a different layout to the village houses,’ he said, almost to himself. ‘Completely different.’

He took a couple of steps, intent on making a rough measurement of the cabin’s dimensions, then stopped suddenly.

‘Did you hear that?’

Audrey nodded, eyes wide. ‘Your last step. It sounded as if the ground were hollow.’

They dropped to their knees together and scabbled at the dirt and leaf mould. Audrey rapped her knuckles on the ground and again they heard the sound of a hollow space beneath. MacFarlane never moved anywhere without a small hand spade in his belt. He took it now and began tossing the earth aside. Then the blade thumped against something solid – solid, but with a certain give in it.

Working quickly, testing the ground for that hollow sound continually as he went, he cleared a rectangular

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space, some forty centimetres by fifty. Audrey leaned forward and brushed the remaining earth from the centre. They found themselves looking at an ancient, desiccated timber panel. A brass ring was set in one side and MacFarlane gently eased the spade under it, lifting it.

The panel came with it, splintering and half disintegrating, to reveal a stone-lined space underneath.

A space that contained an ancient wood and brass chest.

Once more, the professor used the spade to edge the lid of the chest open. Audrey put a hand on his to stop him.

‘Should we be doing this?’ she asked. She knew MacFarlane would normally never disturb an artefact like this without taking the utmost care to preserve it from damage.

He met her gaze.

‘No,’ he said. ‘But I’m not waiting any longer.’

The lid opened with surprising ease. Brass hinges, he thought. If they had been iron they would have fallen to powdery rust long ago. Gently, barely containing his enthusiasm, he lifted it back and peered inside.

The chest was full of pages of manuscripts – written on parchment or vellum that was now brittle and delicate. Gently, he eased one sheet up. The edges crumbled but the centre remained intact. He leaned forward, craning to read the closely written words on the page. Carefully, he studied other pages, handling the brittle manuscript pages with expert care, making out names, places, events.

Then he gently replaced the sheets and leaned back on his haunches, his eyes glistening with excitement.

‘Audrey,’ he said, ‘do you know what we’ve found?’

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She shook her head. Obviously, from his reaction, this was something major. No, she thought, more than that, something *unprecedented*.

‘What is it?’ she asked.

MacFarlane threw back his head and laughed, still unwilling to believe it.

‘We never knew what had become of them,’ he said and, when she cocked her head in an unspoken question, he explained further.

‘The Rangers. Halt, Will Treaty and the others. The chronicles and the legends only take us as far as the point where they returned from their voyage to Nihon-Ja. But now, we have these.’

‘But what are they, Professor?’

MacFarlane laughed aloud. ‘They’re the rest of the tale, my girl! We’ve found the Lost Stories of Araluen!’

DEATH OF
A HERO





It had been a long, hard three days.

Will had been on a tour of the villages surrounding Castle Redmont. It was something he did on a regular basis, keeping in touch with the villagers and their headmen, keeping track of the everyday goings-on. Sometimes, he had learned, little pieces of gossip, seemingly trivial at the time, could become useful in heading off future trouble and friction within the fief.

It was part of being a Ranger. Information, no matter how unimportant it might seem at first glance, was a Ranger's lifeblood.

Now, late in the afternoon, as he rode wearily up to the cabin set among the trees, he was surprised to see lights in the windows and the silhouette of someone sitting on the small verandah.

Surprise turned to pleasure when he recognised Halt. These days Will's mentor was an infrequent visitor to the cabin, spending most of his time in the rooms provided

for him and Lady Pauline in the castle.

Will swung down from the saddle and stretched tired muscles gratefully.

‘Hullo,’ he said. ‘What brings you here? I hope you’ve got the coffee on.’

‘Coffee’s ready,’ Halt replied. ‘Tend to your horse and then join me. I need to talk to you.’ His voice sounded strained.

Curiosity piqued, Will led Tug to the stable behind the cabin, unharnessed him, rubbed him down and set out feed and fresh water. The little horse butted Will’s shoulder gratefully. Will patted Tug’s neck, then headed back to the cabin.

Halt was still on the verandah. He had set out two cups of hot coffee on a small side table and Will sat in one of the wood and canvas chairs and sipped gratefully at the refreshing brew. He felt the warmth of it flowing through his chilled, stiff muscles. Winter was coming on and the wind had been cold and cutting all day.

He gazed at Halt. The grey-bearded Ranger seemed strangely ill at ease. And despite his claim that he needed to talk to Will, once the usual greetings were out of the way, he seemed almost reluctant to begin the conversation.

‘You had something to tell me?’ Will prompted.

Halt shifted uncomfortably in his seat. Then, with an obvious effort, he plunged in.

‘There’s something you should know,’ he said. ‘Something I probably should have told you long ago. It’s just . . . the time never seemed right.’

Will’s curiosity grew. He had never seen Halt in such an uncertain mood. He waited, giving his mentor time to settle his thoughts.

DEATH OF A HERO

‘Pauline thinks it’s time I told you,’ Halt said. ‘So does Arald. They’ve both known about it for some time. So maybe I should just . . . get on with it.’

‘Is it something bad?’ Will asked, and Halt looked directly at him for the first time in several minutes.

‘I’m not sure,’ he said. ‘You might think so.’

For a moment, Will wondered if he wanted to hear it, whatever it might be. Then, seeing the discomfort on Halt’s face, he realised that, good or bad, it was something that his teacher had to get off his chest. He gestured for Halt to continue.

Halt paused for a few more seconds, then he began.

‘I suppose it starts after the final battle against Morgarath’s forces, at Hackham Heath. They’d been retreating for several days. Then they stopped and made a stand. We’d broken their main attack and we were forcing them back. But they were rallying on the right, where they’d found a weak point in our line . . .’