

Tarantulas, Ghosts and Stories

Some of the most beautiful sunsets in the island of Ireland are to be found touching the Antrim Hills and the shores of Belfast Lough. The house called 'Little Lea' is often touched by the rays of the sinking sun and when C. S. Lewis moved to live there as a boy of seven, open fields lay to the front of the house and ran down to the shores of the Lough.

"I bagsy this attic as my study," said Clive exploring an attic in the roof, "I will write my stories here."

"Stories?" you might ask. C.S. Lewis loved stories. Throughout his life he found it really hard to make anything by hand. He had only one joint in his thumb and therefore couldn't make anything with scissors and cardboard. He longed to make ships and engines from card and paper but it only ended in tears. He could, though, hold a pencil and wrote stories instead. It was a blessing in disguise!

Many years later C. S. Lewis wrote that you can do more with a castle in a story than with the best cardboard castle that ever stood on a nursery table. Millions of children were to be very glad that he loved that attic at 'Little Lea' for it became the model for the beginning of the adventures into Narnia.

On wet, windy, afternoons as well as on sunlit days the two small boys escaped into a fantasy land; the world they invented was called Boxen. It was a land that animals inhabited as humans inhabit ours. Clive wrote stories of brave mice and rabbits who rode out dressed as armour clad knights - to kill cats.

“Warren, you can add the trains and steamships as we plot Animal Land together,” said Clive to his brother.

The fact was that Warren and Clive hardly ever had a pencil or pen out of their hand. Warren loved drawing steamships and trains and Clive delighted in drawing dressed animals. They drew maps of Animal Land, Warren, of course, mapping the main shipping routes from Animal Land, and the special island they created. It was called India like the country in the real world but this India was a world of their own creation.

Every summer the Lewis family went off to the seaside for a holiday. The boys loved it, and their mother, Flora did too. She was an attractive, university graduate and a highly intelligent woman. She even taught her boys French and Latin.

“To be quite honest I find holidays by the sea very tedious,” their father Albert would tell his friends. He was a busy solicitor, a handsome looking man with a moustache and he could be found, on summer holidays, wandering up and down the beach constantly looking at his watch and obviously longing to be back at work.

“What on earth are you saying, Clive?” Flora asked her little boy on one of their summer holidays.

“He is Jacksie!” answered Clive, pointing to himself.

“Jacksie?” said Flora with exasperation.

“He is Jacksie!” insisted Clive. What was Clive talking about? He was in fact wanting himself to be called after a little dog who had lived near his home and who had sadly got run over.

Amazingly from that moment on Clive refused to be called by any other name but Jack. For the rest of his life C.S. Lewis became known as “Jack’s” to his family and Jack to his friends, so, from now on in this book we will call him Jack too.

“Calm down, Jack, please calm down,” said Flora holding her son close after he woke one night in a cold sweat from some dreams he was having.

“Why do I have these terrifying dreams, mother?” Jack asked.

“What do you see in your dreams, Jack?”

“Huge tarantula spiders!” answered her frightened son. “And lots of ghosts.”

Jack suffered from a very vivid imagination and that very imagination was eventually to turn him into one of the greatest storytellers of the twentieth century. Fortunately his imagination was not always filled with tarantulas and ghosts.

One day Warren rushed into Jack’s room. “Have a look at this!” he said, excitedly. In his hand Warren had a biscuit tin lid on which he had created a miniature toy garden with twigs and flowers, covered with moss. It fired Jack’s imagination in a very deep way and he

called it “The first beauty I ever saw.” For the rest of his life Jack imagined Paradise to have something of Warren’s toy garden.

“Was there ever a house like this house for books?” thought Annie Harper, Jack and Warren’s Governess, who was an excellent teacher. She was right. There were books in the study, books in the drawing room, books in the cloakroom, books, two deep on the bookcase, in the bookcase in the landing, books in a bedroom, books piled high in the attic. Books, books and more books were all over the house for Albert never got rid of any of the books he bought.

Jack was allowed to read any book he liked, and he read them constantly. From the writing of Conan Doyle to Mark Twain, from E. Nesbit and her book *The Phoenix and The Wishing Carpet* to *Gulliver’s Travels*, from Beatrix Potter to Longfellow’s poetry, Jack was touched by the power of words. He lived in his imagination.

“You are such a little chatterbox,” said Lizzie Endicott, the boys’ nurse. Lizzie was from County Down and in her the boys saw no flaw. All his life C. S. Lewis could never be called a snob. He never looked down upon people, whatever their background. Less than a mile from his home stood a huge house called “Mountbracken” where some titled relatives lived and he visited often. He never forgot that good people can be found in all sorts of places in life. He knew how to relate to ordinary people as well as intelligent, university types.

Sadly, though, Jack's snug and peaceful life in 'Little Lea', the house of long corridors, sunlit roofs and fascinating attics was shattered by a great loss.

One night he was feeling quite ill and started to cry. His head ached and his tooth throbbed. The pathetic whimpers from the little boys room would have broken your heart.

"Why does my mother not come to me?" he kept crying out as he tossed and turned in bed. "Please get her to come."

But his mother didn't come. There were noises coming and going all over 'Little Lea'. Doors opened and doors shut. There were anxious murmurings of one kind and another and then, at last, his father came. He was crying.

"Jack," he said, tenderly, "your mother has cancer. There will have to be an operation here in our house. Hopefully it will lead to a cure."

But it didn't. Gradually Flora Lewis was overcome by the disease and her two small boys were kept at a distance from her delirium and pain.

"Warnie," said Jack to his brother, "we need each other more than ever before."

"I'm here Jack," said Warren. "You need not be afraid." The two young brothers grew closer and closer.

"Father's temper is frightening," said Jack, as he witnessed his poor father come under the huge pressure of anxiety for his dying wife. Albert Lewis could do nothing to help his wife. Under extreme stress he would say wild things.

Jack prayed to God that his mother would recover. He was sure there would be a miracle. His whole idea of God through his childhood was that God was some kind of magician. He did not know him as Saviour nor as Judge. He had neither fear nor awe nor love for Him and he expected that when He had answered his prayer He would simply go away. But God did not cure Flora Lewis and He also did not go away. Jack was, one day, to come to know Him through Jesus Christ and his whole attitude to God was to change. That day, though, was still a long way off.

Flora Lewis died in 1908 and all Jack's pain at her death was to surface later in the character of Digory in *The Magician's Nephew*. And there was a lot of pain.

Security vanished from Jack's life when his mother died. She had been an anchor for him, someone to turn to. In her presence he had felt tranquillity and happiness. Later on he reported that "There was to be much fun, many pleasures, many stabs of joy; but no more of the old security. It was all sea and islands now; the great continent had sunk like Atlantis".