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Feathers and Light

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FEATHERS AND LIGHT

A NOVEL

JOHN CHEESEMAN

Also by John Cheeseman

Reluctant Gods

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PART ONE
BRIGHID AND THE BATTLE OF LIGHT AND DARK
(Told by The Narrator)

ONE

Morgan and Feron were a young couple just starting out together. They'd met by chance on a backpacking trip on one of those very long trails through the wilderness. At least that's what they said. Afterwards, they found a piece of land in a green Vale with lots of lush forests and sunny meadows all around.

Although this wasn't so long ago, their little homestead didn't have Internet or cellphone coverage. Indeed, it was well off the grid. They built their house there and put in a pond and a garden. As it happened, it was only about a mile through the forest to the cottage of a woman who was like a mother to Morgan. Her name was Sophia.

Before too long, Feron and Morgan were expectant parents. In the week before their child was born, a murder of crows (that's what a flock of crows is called) landed on trees in the garden and just sat there patiently. That's unusual behavior for crows, but nevertheless, that's what they did.

Very early on the day of the birth, a small wren landed in the hazel tree by the nursery window and sang. And at just about noon, Morgan and Feron became the happy parents of a baby girl. She was, of course, beautiful. They called her Brighid, which is a bit odd because it sounds like it should be spelled Brie... like the cheese. It turns out it's Irish, and the gh is silent. Go figure.

Anyhow, Brighid was healthy, happy, rather strong willed, and seldom slept through the night for the first few years... so nothing new or different to report there. Although it may not seem all that exciting to hear about, Brighid had a loving, peaceful childhood. There's always so much for children to learn and to do, and they change so rapidly that there isn't time for boredom. And frankly, parents want their children to have that kind of childhood whether it makes for exciting stories or not. Excitement is not all it's cracked up to be.

Brighid, like her mother, had the very blackest hair and black eyes that burned brightly from deep within. And from the start, no matter what she was doing—even nursing—she hummed to herself.

Often, indeed pretty much every day in good weather, Brighid and Morgan would go through the dark forest to visit “grandmother” Sophia. Of course, they took her a basket of goodies most days, and they would have “tea” together.

As you can imagine, in that all children hear this story at some point, when she was old enough, Brighid heard about Little Red Riding Hood. Naturally, she immediately wanted a hood of her own if she were going to go through the forest with a basket of goodies for Grandmother.

“What color should it be?” asked her mother, thinking “red”.

“Well,” she said, “a green one to start with. Green is a good color for humming to.”

Her mother looked at her like she was a bit odd, but so it was.

Now, on the way to Sophia's house, off on a side path at another edge of the Vale, there was a bakery run by a woman named Freya. She had two helpers from a nearby village. The outside of the bakery was decorated like a gingerbread house and the young helpers—or so they said—were called Hansel and Gretl.

Hansel let everyone know that he'd started helping Freya when he was still quite little—so little that his fingers were as thin as chicken bones and if he had wanted to, he could have crawled into the big oven.

“OK, roll your eyes,” he would say, “but it sells pastry.”

As you might have already guessed, this bakery was where Brighid and her mother got the basket of goodies on their way to Grandmother's house.

With all this going on, it's no wonder that Brighid had a good imagination and a great deal of fun using it. From the time she was little and riding on the back of her mom's bike when they went to visit Sophia, they would look out for wolves lurking in the woods.

Sophia played along, sometimes wearing a big bonnet and climbing into bed as they came up the path. But she didn't have big teeth, ears, or eyes. And, of course, there *were* no wolves.

Even so, there were certainly other animals in the forest. One of these could actually have been a *possible*, though highly unlikely, danger. So, from their earliest trips, her mother's bike, and later their basket (when they walked), was equipped with "bear bells." These would alert any bears in the area that they were coming and say it would be nice of them to get out of the way.

One day, when Brighid was about nine, she came to her parents and made a very serious announcement. She said, "I am nine, so I am old enough to go to Grandmother Sophia's house by myself... at least sometimes." She really didn't want to hurt her mother's feelings, you see, so she could still come along sometimes.

And so it would be—after some discussion, of course—but her parents made two rules. "First, when you are walking through the forest, you must sing—which of course you do anyhow. And every now and then, you must holler 'Hey Bear!' to make sure the bears can get out of your way.

"And second, just in case, you must learn to use bear spray and always carry it with you."

Bear spray is a nasty thing meant to give bears second thoughts about eating little girls or even great big grownups.

"OK," Brighid said, "Deal!"

Needless to say, Brighid felt very grown up going through the forest by herself to have "tea" with Grandmother Sophia, and spending hours in her garden.

Now you might be wondering about going to school. After all, nine is a bit old for that not to have even been mentioned. So briefly, Brighid had her schooling at home but at least as exciting things to learn in the

forest and in Grandmother Sophia's garden. And, as nine year olds do, she learned it all.

As time went on, following the pattern of other young girls you might know, Brigid got older. And as she did, she asked for, and received, other privileges. For example, when she was ten-ish, she asked for a little hut to be built in the garden where she could go and think. Or, as she put it using her growing vocabulary, to cogitate or ponder.

SEVEN

As the road rose, the sky got darker and more foreboding. Soon, they were walking in total darkness. On either side, they could just make out what looked like human forms but without real bodies. Brigid and her companions were being swept along in a river of spirits. On one side, they could see a glow in each one, and they heard singing. On the other side, the spirits were empty and dark.

Because he was best at seeing in the dark, Malik said, "I can still see and can lead. It's probably best to keep your Light hidden for now. Your eyes will get used to the dark."

But even if his idea was to remain as hidden as possible, it was clear that the demons knew who was coming. They *could* be setting a trap, but Drein, circling overhead, was on the lookout for that.

After a while, she flew down and joined them. "I can see what's happening," she said. "These over on the right of us are the empty spirits whose souls have been taken by the demons. They've been called in to form an army to fight you.

"The spirits of the power hungry and greedy shouldn't be too much of a threat... they've always been for themselves only. They don't know how to cooperate, let alone fight. Indeed, they're so busy proving they're the *most* wealthy, or *most* powerful that they really don't see anything else.

"The spirits of the haters may be a bit more trouble, however, because all they've *ever* done is fight.

“All three groups have experienced power in one form or another. That made it easier for the demons to take them over. But they’re still only spirits. They don’t have souls, and they don’t have the weapons that their physical bodies carried.”

“What about the ones that are glowing?” asked Brighid.

“There are also three groups there,” said Drein. “First, there are spirits and souls of those who’ve died, mostly either at the hands of the evil ones or from the disease.

“Second, there are spirits of those who have been beaten down so much they’ve given up. Although they’re still complete, they’re weakened.”

“And the third group?” asked Hébert.

“Even from here, you can see those are the brightest lights. It looks like they have followed you intentionally; their presence here is no accident. These are ones who have survived and prevailed.”

Seeing by the Light of the souls alone, they soon saw that the stream of spirits was splitting. The group *without* souls was heading off on one path; those *with* souls were going on another with Brighid and her companions. Between them, a deep and rocky abyss opened. Brighid and her companions wondered if there might be some plan to shoot or throw something across the abyss at them, but could see no weapons yet.

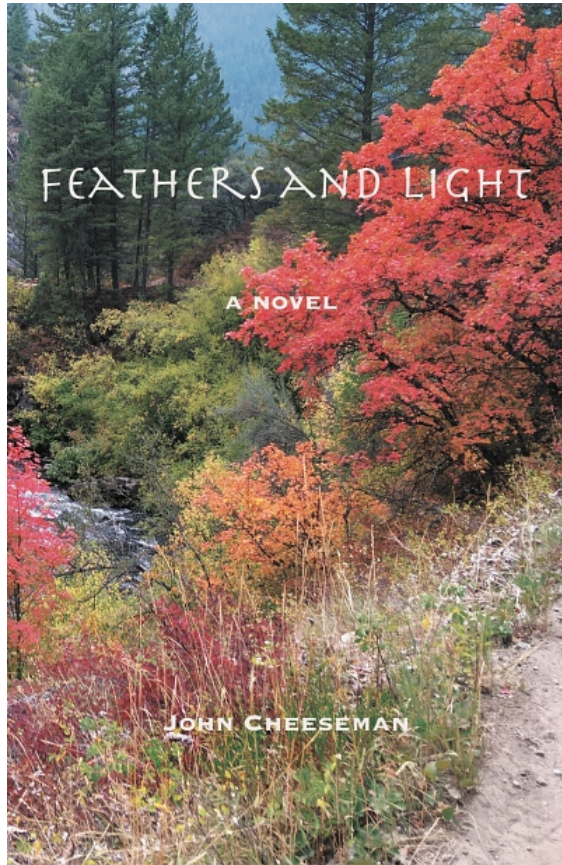
After passing a seemingly endless flow of spirits on both sides of the abyss, they could see, far in the distance on the other side, the demons themselves. Apparently, they thought it would be best to lead from the rear in case they needed to leave in a hurry. Only the Demon of Hatred had a recognizable form. She was an orange serpent and she was right in the middle of her “troops” inciting as much hate as possible.

Finally, Brighid stopped. The Plane of the Gods had turned out to be completely featureless, so this was as good a place as any, she decided. This would be the battlefield. She and her companions assembled at the front of their “troops”, not at the rear like the demons had.

The more they looked, the more clearly they saw that the troops on the other side were a disorganized, soul-less mass. They also saw, unmistakably, that despite appearances on the Plane of the Humans, they were lazy. They’d never stood for much and likely weren’t going to start now.

Then, she looked behind her and saw a huge, orderly assembly. But she also knew that they were *not* an army. On earth, they were peaceful and humble, and that is not at all the same thing as a force wanting to kill and destroy an enemy. On the contrary, these spirits now began to sing... a song of unity and harmony and hope. As more joined in, the music got louder and louder.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - John Cheeseman is a retired plant biologist and sometimes folk singer. He lives in the shadow of the Teton Mountains in Idaho. John has written one other children's novel, *Reluctant Gods*, the second book in this series.



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