

Darwin's Daughter

by Christopher Green

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The Tangled Bank

Love, Wonder, and Evolution

Edited by Chris Lynch



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If he is quiet, he can hear her through the walls as she tries to breathe, her lungs working too hard for so little a reward as air. When she coughs it is the same noise the cats make when they have something sharp lodged in their throats.

Annie is dying again.

The sound of her breathing falls away, and Charles finds that he is holding his own breath too. He prays that he will never hear another of her tired inhalations, or the weary sigh the air makes when she pushes it from her lungs. He prays that he will always hear it. Oh, to be able to listen to her breathe once more and not wonder if it is the last time she shall!

At last, she takes another breath. He can hear her work at the atmosphere in her room like a clockwork bellows. She is winding down to death again, to be sure, but she is not yet finished. He closes his eyes and concentrates on her respiration, imagines it to be a road, himself upon it, struggling up the heights with the crest so slowly approaching. And after the climb, the sick, silly rush of the downward slope on the other side.

Charles gets out of the bed, glad that Emma is with her family in Staffordshire. He does not want his wife to have to go through this with him. Once was too much.

The house is a grand one, the heavy door matched with well-oiled hinges. He opens it and moves down the hall to Annie's door. He presses his ear to it, as if it were a patient's chest. After a time, he opens the door and enters.

The moonlight allows him the dim shape of her. The clouds are rolling in, outside, or rolling out, he does not care which. The shadows they cast are strewn on the floor like dirty linen. One of the shadows is darker than the others, an inkblot against the crispness of Annie's pale ghost. Charles takes a step forward and the shadow lifts its muzzle from where it had been pressed against her face and turns to look at him. Moonlight lines its striped fur. His practised eye catalogues the broad face, rounded ears, striped flanks. Moonlight shines along the heavy line of its tail, which it flicks as it bares its teeth at him. When he snatches up Annie's long-neglected croquet baton from its place against the wall, both of the ghosts are gone.

The next morning at breakfast, Annie has chosen a pallid complexion to wear to the table. Her eyes are sunken, trapped between her troubled brow and the scarlet fever that enflames her cheeks.

"Good morning, dear one," Charles says as he comes into the room. He has spent some time at the mirror, and has combed and groomed himself as is befitting a man of his standing. He will not have his daughter seeing him as the wild-eyed, tangle-haired hermit the caricatures in *The Hornet* had made him out to be.

She smiles at him, and it was as if his child at last looks out from the frail vessel that has consumed her. "Good morning, Father."

"Tell me, did you sleep well?"

"Very well."

Charles sits and places his napkin on his lap. "No troubling dreams?"

"No." She lines up the silverware nearest her plate just so, as

she used to do. "Did you have bad dreams, Father?"

"No, dear child. I have outgrown them." No, his dreams could never be as terrible as what the waking world has held for him, these last few days.

Charles eats his breakfast slowly and watches Annie. She is whispering to herself, as she often did when she was alive. He remembers her box of keepsakes, bright threads and ribbons and small squares of cloth that her mother had lent her from the sewing box. Annie made these items into clothes for her dolls. She always whispered when she spoke to her dolls, when she pretended to feed them or to teach them manners.

It is the softest music, and Charles finds much pleasure in listening to his daughter's voice. Every now and then she carefully separates a scrap of food from the rest and lowers it to the ground. When her hand appears again, it is empty.

*He remembers her
box of keepsakes,
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"Tell me, Annie," he says to her at last, "what have your dolls left to learn from you?"

"I haven't a doll with me to teach."

"Then to whom are you speaking?"

Annie lifts her shoulders in a shrug her mother had never been able to break her of. "I don't know its name. It is lost, though, and hungry. They are all so hungry, Father."

"Do they hurt you?" he asks.

"No, Father. They are warm, and in such a sorry state that when I pet them I can feel their bones beneath the fur."

"I see. You should tell them to go away, child."

Annie's gaze goes beyond him. She is focused on something

that has come into being behind him, and Charles grips the edge of the table in his hands and refuses to turn to face it. He can feel the bunched power of it at his back, the whuff of its breath.

"They are already away. They are as far away as they can get. And so am I."

Charles smiles broadly across the table at her. He knows he is going mad, that this hallucination, this bittersweet visitation will play out regardless. "Let me have a look, in that case," he says. He turns and stares into the empty air between himself and the wall, then pushes his chair back and makes a show of looking beneath it. There is nothing there but bare floor and the tresses of the dress they buried her in. "I see it, now. It is a marvellous creature, indeed." He gives her a wink and returns to his seat.

Annie slices a strip of orange peel from the fruit on her plate and lowers it to the floor. "He won't eat from my hand, yet."

"Some animals are never quite tame, my dear."

His daughter looks at him blankly.

"I mean to say that some of them are not meant for the leash, or the collar."

"But he is so thin, Father. His little eyes go so wide when presented with food."

"Annie."

"Poor thing." Her voice drops to the same whisper she uses with her dolls. "Sometimes when I look, he isn't there. Have you ever felt like that, like if you look away from something you love, it will be gone the next time your eyes seek it out?"

His hands are fists, and he cannot relax them. Why was she here, and why must she taunt him so? "Enough, Annie. Even Fathers tire of their daughter's games, eventually."

She ignores him, instead concentrating on cutting free another sliver of orange. "If you saw what you've done to them, it would

go some way toward forgiveness, I should think."

"Annie, I said no more!" He bangs his hand on the table and the cutlery jumps.

She sets down the knife and fork. He can hear the breath as it begins to rattle in her chest again.

Charles sighs. "I think it best that you retire to your room. The stillness of the upstairs air will help your breathing."

Annie stands. He watches her hands very closely, making certain that they are empty. "He isn't mine, Father," she said. "None of them are. They're yours."

Charles sobs and holds his face in his hands. He doesn't hear her leave the room, but she is gone when at last he finds the strength to look up. He stands and once more walks around to where she had been sitting. The timber floor is freshly waxed, and here and there lie tiny slivers of scattered orange peel.

He is working in his study. The rustle of papers, the scratch of inked implement against parchment is a joy to him, a world of unveiled wonder. A patch of sunlight sits in a corner on a pile of old books, glad of the chance for a rest.

Correspondence. It is a polite term for the arguments, denials, decrees, and praise the postman delivers to his home. Each of them want some piece of him, and they bite and nibble until he feels there is nothing left of him.

When he looks up from his work, Annie is standing before him, framed by the doorway. She is the last of her kind, and Charles can only see her pinned thusly, pinned and framed, as close to living as she will ever be again.

"Annie, you startled me."

"I'm sorry, Father. I wanted to sit with you, while you worked. As I used to."

"I'd like that."

Where once she would have delighted in the sunlight, now she keeps to the shadows. She sits before a row of specimens he has arranged on a low table. They are the heads of lemurs and orangutans, suspended in an embalming fluid of his own design. They watch him, and when he looks them square in the eye they tremble and bare their teeth at him.

Charles returns to his letters, and Annie sits in silence until she fades from view.

Before bed, he returns to his study. There is a dodo at the desk, scratching at the papers upon it with a pen it holds firmly in its beak. Charles stands in the doorway where Annie had so recently stood, and the bird looks at him, stiffens, and falls to the floor dead.

There is a name on the papers, written by the dodo in his daughter's hand.

'Annie'.

Sleep will not come. He will not let it. He listens to Annie breathe. She is whispering, and it makes her breath hard and laboured. She is telling something secrets, teaching something manners. She is talking to something that has come into their home without invitation, and Charles is sure she is sharing stories with it that she would have once shared with him.

He leaves the bed, and then the room, but cannot bring himself to listen at her door again. She has returned. That is enough. What does it matter what she says to these things that follow her around?

Charles enters his study and lights the lamp on the desk. He has stacked the papers, careful to put the one with his daughter's

name on the bottom. He could not bring himself to burn it. He is a scientist. It is not in him to destroy a specimen.

The heads in their jars are no more than they appear to be. Even so, he moves to the table and turns them so that they face away.

The letters that await his response are piled high, and obligation pulls at him like the tide. The first is a request for information, which he sets aside. The second contains an invitation to speak to a women's group, the third a poorly spelt diatribe, the fourth and fifth requests for donation. The sixth letter is from Wallace, sent a week prior.

He opens it.

Wallace will be in London, and would Charles be available to join him for lunch at the gentleman's club, one afternoon?

Charles stands and tucks the letter into the waistcoat he will wear tomorrow when he boards the train. He will not go to bed, where he can hear the breath of his dead daughter, and instead he closes and locks the door to his study and falls asleep within.

The club is a stately place, verily swimming in a sea of blue cigar smoke. Wallace has his old table, and when Charles approaches he smiles and does him the honour of not standing. They are friends, and Wallace has a glass of Charles' preferred brand of gin waiting for him.

They speak of old friends and mutual enemies, but Charles is careful not to ask after Wallace's family, as the polite response would force him to speak of his own.

Wallace lets the ice melt in his glass and watches Charles sip at the gin. "I didn't think you'd find the time," he says, after a time.

Charles waves the words away along with the smoke that

drifts to them from other tables. "Nonsense. Can't a man make arrangements to meet with a dear friend, these days?"

Wallace's eyebrows go up. "Ordinarily not, it would seem. You have always been a busy man, Charles, but you have become an important one as well."

"Ah, but the cost of it all! The letters, bags full, each with their own set of tiny jaws and sharp, nibbling teeth."

Wallace leans back and lights his pipe. The smoke hangs thick over the buzz of the muted conversations taking place around them. "Let us get down to it, then. I take it you have seen them too? I mean, I assume that to be why you are here..."

Charles looks to the floor, where a small finch hops about beneath the table, tapping here and pecking there. He recognises it, indeed would know it anywhere. He found them in the Galapagos, and when it alights on the cuff of his pant leg he smiles. The bird pecks him, then flits up to land beside Wallace's hands on the tabletop.

"Are you watching one of them now, Charles?"

"I am."

"Your daughter visited me."

"My Annie?"

Wallace nods. "You know very well I am a grand believer in such things. I have seen your dour face become as hard as granite when I speak to you of my séances and ghostly anecdotes. Can you not see why she would speak with me before approaching you?"

Charles wipes at his forehead with the heel of his hand. The room is warm, and getting warmer. "She will not tell me what she wants."

"She is worried. I told her that your bouts of illness were increasing in their frequency. I think she wanted to do what she

could for you. Before the others grew in strength.”

“Others. You mean the creatures? What do they want from me?”

Wallace adopts a hurt expression and taps the bowl of his pipe against the varnished mahogany. The finch beside it taps in time with it as well.

Charles drags his gaze to Wallace’s eyes. “If this is some game, then I hope you will have mercy on me and play it no longer. Perhaps I should already know what these things want from me, but I admit that I do not. If you do, man, then tell me.”

“Did you never wonder why I did not pen my own book, as you did with your *Origin*?” He studies Charles for a moment, then smiles. “You haven’t, have you? Not a second thought. The ‘greatest idea a man has ever had’ and you’ve never asked yourself why I didn’t push as hard as you.”

“You said a share in the idea was enough.”

“It was. More than enough, if truth be told. You may be a great thinker, Charles, but the narrowness of your focus has always astounded me. Are you a man still unwilling to see the consequences of the things you told the world, or simply unable?”

“Now see here, Wallace, if this goes back to some old scandal or—”

Wallace raises his hand. “Charles. Please.”

Charles finds that his ears are burning, and gentlemen at other tables are glancing at them and speaking of the great men in whispers that remind him of Annie and her dolls.

“Have a drink, first,” Wallace says, and waits for Charles to finish the gin. When he has, Wallace clears his throat. “It is a difficult thing to begin, but I will, and will trust that in so doing you will place your faith in the honesty of my words. I am not

here to play you for a fool."

"Very well."

"The idea that started all of this was mine. Yes, yes," he says, holding up a hand and nodding politely before Charles has a chance to be offended, "of course that does not discredit it as being yours as well. But you said yourself that it was reading my words that prompted you to finish your own thoughts and also submit them. Correct?"

Charles nods. Wallace doesn't seem to hold a grudge on account of his being pipped at the post, and so he lets him speak. When the waiter brings him another gin he lets it sit.

"The idea's time had come," Wallace says once the waiter has left. "Once thought it could not be unthought, and yet I saw it as the duty of man to couch it in terms that man would understand." He inhales deeply from the pipe and blows a trail of smoke from his mouth that would have made any sailor proud. "I tried. By the Almighty, I tried. I spent weeks with the idea in my head, unable to find the words to convey it. And then the visits began."

Wallace's pipe has gone out, of a sudden, and he stares into it for a moment before continuing.

"The small ones came first. Perhaps it is through their greater number that they had the strength to press through. I know not. All I am certain of is that the little ones came, and only at night. A newt here, blackly going up the wall of my study in the glow of candlelight. A vole beneath an armchair. A frog, a mouse, a swarm of bees. I put their appearance down to stress, of course. I'd been working very hard, as I'm absolutely certain you have, and the things did not harm me. What man hasn't seen strangeness through eyes made weary by work?"

Charles nods.

"One night, I awoke to a flutter against my cheek. I opened

my eyes, still thinking it a dream, and saw a moth, huge and bright as a Chinaman's paper lantern, resting against my face. It was watching me. I could see its eyes by the moonlight, and they were not the eyes of a creature without thought. No, not at all." He drains his drink and shakes his head at the waiter when the man starts to move in their direction. "When I put my hand to my face, Charles, the thing was gone. And so was my desire to be responsible for them." Wallace checks his timepiece. "I must go, soon. I am taking a train to Wales."

Charles says a word he has not often said. It catches in his throat and he must cough roughly to dislodge it. He takes a sip of the gin before trying again. "Ghosts."

"That is my presumption, and I am glad we have progressed to a place where it is yours as well." Wallace leans closer. "Look around you. Look at these men."

Charles does. The club is an exclusive one, crafted from the finest wood and chefs and, therefore, clientele. The men there speak of empire, of trade and transaction and tax and tariff. He sees British Officers and lesser nobles and Queen's Councilmen everywhere.

Wallace nods. "Yes. Can you see it, now? Before us, Charles, before you and I, the world went on about its way. Species adapted, or didn't. They prospered or didn't. Indeed, almost every single extinction the world has ever known has taken place discreetly out of sight, millennia ago. But not all."

"No."

"What of the species that are gone, that are *going* to go? Thylacine. Dodo. Do you see them too? Do they also visit you?"

Charles thought of the thing he'd found crouched on Annie's

*I opened my eyes
and saw a moth,
huge and bright*

chest, of the bird in his office that had written her name in her own hand. "They do."

"It isn't the end. No, they brought me creatures I had never seen before, or ones that I *knew* to be still alive. A tiger prowled the grounds of my estate for a month, and when my children were frightened in the woods last year, I expected it to be the tiger again. It wasn't. Do you know what chased them? I gave them a field guide to animals, so that they could go through it and find the culprit. They thumbed past English animals, and past European ones as well. They went right to the end of the book without finding it. It wasn't until they saw paper the following Sunday that they found their pursuer."

Charles shakes his head. "What was the beast?"

"A polar bear, Charles. Have you seen one? Arctic region, live on the ice. The latest expedition came back last year with hides. Do you know what the explorers said, when I asked them some thinly veiled questions? They told me there are a plethora of them. Myriad. Legion."

"Not extinct?"

"Far from it."

"Then—"

Wallace grins and tucks the pipe's stem back between his teeth. "Aha! We do still think alike. They aren't extinct now, but they will be, one day. And we gave these people a reason. An *excuse*. A species of penguin dies because we've eaten all the fish they eat and the penguin weren't ready to adapt to new food. Alas! A species of bird dies because the Russians love the yolk spread across their toast, and we say that the bird shouldn't have built its nest on the ground. Tragedy! When that tiger's gone, I daresay we'll all agree it was because the poor sod hadn't adapted fast enough to bullets! It's a reason, Charles, an

excuse to go right on doing things as we have because it's the way we were naturally selected to be."

"It isn't so."

"Bollocks."

"But—"

Wallace reaches out and grasps Charles' sleeve. "Survival of the fittest. That's their only understanding of the things we told them, don't you see that? Anything that doesn't survive wasn't fit to, so they'll go on butchering one species after another, all the while convinced that they're doing God's work for Him."

Wallace stands and tugs at the hem of his shirt for a moment until it hangs from him just so. "They're yours now, Charles. They know what we did, what you're still doing. This time, though, they've brought Annie with them."

"Why?"

"She'll tell you, if you ask her. It's the reason she's here."

Wallace stands and pushes through the cigar smoke and accepts his hat and coat from the maître d'.

Charles and the finch both watch him go.

Charles walks in the garden. The grounds are beautiful, and within them he hears the thrum of native bees mixed with that of hummingbirds he is certain are dead.

"Where is Mother?" Annie asks from beside him.

She startles him, but Charles cannot bring himself to be truly frightened of her. "She is in Staffordshire, and will return two days hence."

Annie becomes very serious. He remembers that look in her eye, when she is frustrated by her adult thoughts being perceived as childish, to her age and not their merit.

"She would love to see you, dearest," he says. "Your mother's

faith will hold up to you far better than mine.”

She shakes her head, braids bouncing on her shoulders. “I can’t be here when she’s here too. None of us can. Be glad of that.”

There is a cheetah at his daughter’s side. She has always loved them, had spent one summer filling notebooks with pictures of lean, spotted beasts playing in the shade or dashing across the paper. Annie sets her hand on the cat’s head.

The cheetah purrs.

Charles is tired. What little exertion he’s had has made him perspire. He finds a place in the shade, like one of Annie’s cheetahs, and sits at a wide wooden bench with ivory inlays. The ivory is rough beneath his hand, and for a moment he feels it quiver as if it has become tusk once more.

Neither Annie nor the cat sit beside him, which puts their faces on a level with his own. “You are not real,” he says.

Annie smiles. “I am real enough.”

“That cat isn’t real.”

The beast growls, and what light comes through the sun-speckled shade glints off its teeth. Charles feels the wind grow still.

“He is as real as he can be, Father.”

“But they’re still alive! The tiger that Wallace saw, the polar bear, this cheetah. They’re all still living their lives, in other places. Why must they haunt me?”

“They can see farther than you, Father. They know what comes next.”

Charles shakes his head. These things are going to follow him for the rest of his life, humming and buzzing and roaring; a noise that will fill his world forever. He can see it, now that she has shown him.

He risks the cat's jaws and leans forward on the bench. "I cannot be held responsible for seeing a truth that so many before me had not."

"That is what Mr. Wallace said you would say."

Charles frowned. "What do they want from me?"

"They want you to hurt, as they hurt, to remember losing something the world can never regain."

"Is that why you're here, then? Just to cause me pain?"

She shook her head. "I'm here to stop them. They are hungry, and want to leap upon you. Mother has kept them away all of these years, with her touch and her voice and her love. I am here to do the same, until she returns."

Charles feels his chest go tight, and forces himself to breathe more slowly. The periphery of his vision swims. His palms are sweaty, and the blood pounds in his ears like the roar of a cannon.

"Mr. Wallace said you were becoming sick more often."

Charles nods, unable to speak. It is true. The sickness that has run through his life like a well-stitched thread is becoming more prevalent.

"That's them. The weight of them, you could say. They can't bite you, or scratch you, not really, but they can hurt you from the inside. I've been asking them to stop."

The whispered words. All this time he had felt betrayed by them, and she was simply pleading his case. "And will they?"

Annie doesn't answer. She'd always been an emotional child, and Charles sees the tears well up in her eyes.

"Very well," he says. "I thank you for coming to help me. Will you tell them that I understand what Wallace meant? All of this, speciation, evolution, I see how one can take it to mean that there is but one law, 'Do what thou wilt.' They have read, but they have not understood." He looks from her to the cheetah.

"The beasts cull the weak from the herd and make it stronger. We kill the strongest, weakening the herd, and reward ourselves for our efforts by lining their heads up on the walls of our studies. Survival of the fittest indeed."

"Understanding isn't enough."

Charles mops at his forehead with a handkerchief. "What is done cannot be undone."

Annie places her hand on his shoulder. "They know that too."

"When your mother returns, you'll be leaving, won't you? Forever?"

"Yes."

"And the creatures?"

"I'll do my best to take them with me, though they are cunning. I daren't say you have seen their last."

"Annie, don't go. Please. You are my joy, my sunshine, and once you are gone there will never be another like you. I don't care if these things make every day an agony. No pain they could possibly cause can equal the grief of your leaving."

Tears fall from her eyes. "If my leaving were not going to hurt you, they would not have brought me along."

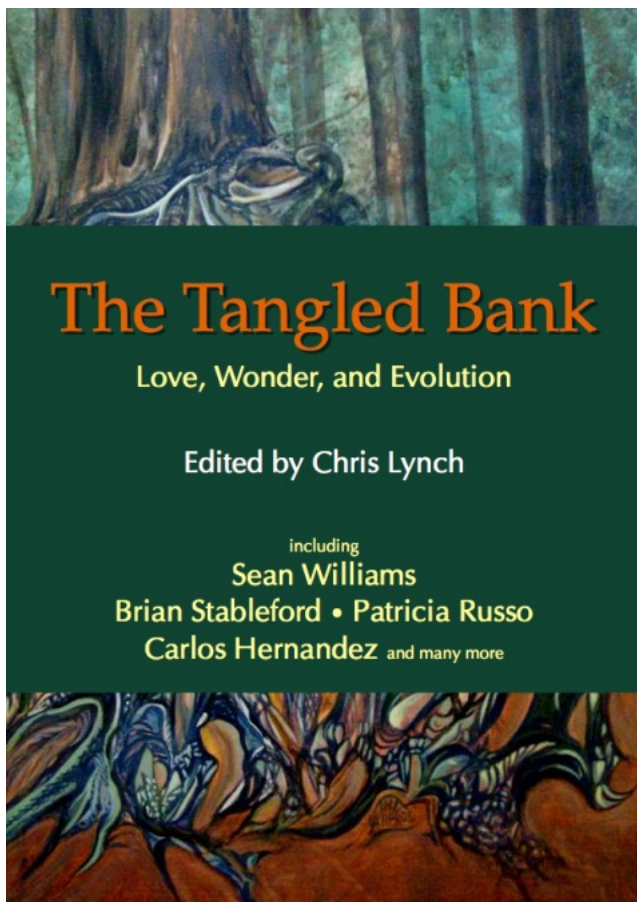
Charles feels the weight of many dark gazes upon him. Everywhere he looks he sees them, beasts and butterflies. They watch him, sniff at him, hang from him, ring him in a circle of what Man has done and will continue to do.

Charles voice is a broken thing. "There will never be another like you, my dearest."

Annie reaches up and smooths his hair into place. "There will never be another like any of us."

The cheetah looks at him with bright and piercing eyes, and Charles looks away.





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