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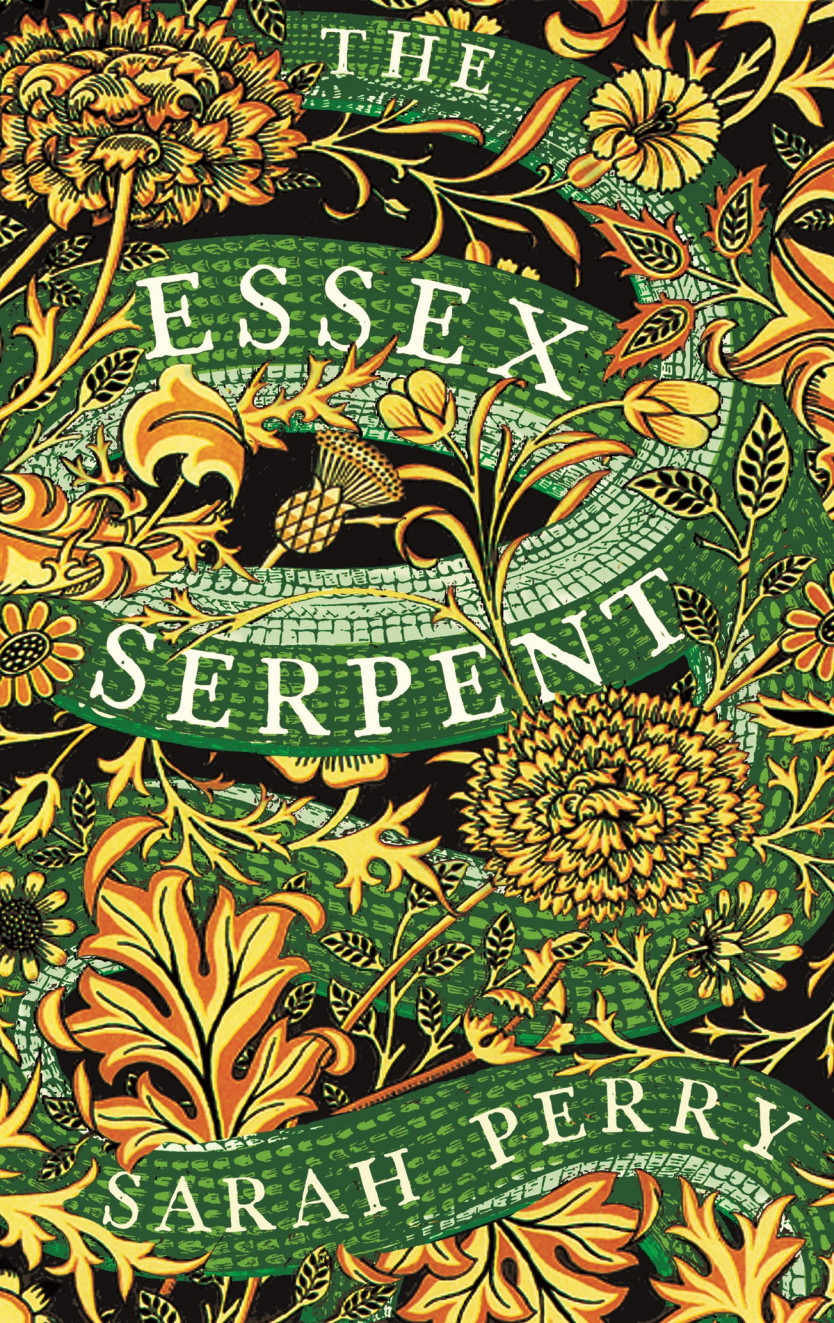
The Essex Serpent

Written by Sarah Perry

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THE
ESSEX
SERPENT
SARAH PERRY

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For Stephen Crowe

If you press me to say why I loved him, I can say no more than because he was he, and I was I.

Michel de Montaigne, *On Friendship*

NEW YEAR'S EVE

A young man walks down by the banks of the Blackwater under the full cold moon. He's been drinking the old year down to the dregs, until his eyes grew sore and his stomach turned, and he was tired of the bright lights and bustle. 'I'll just go down to the water,' he said, and kissed the nearest cheek: 'I'll be back before the chimes.' Now he looks east to the turning tide, out to the estuary slow and dark, and the white gulls gleaming on the waves.

It's cold, and he ought to feel it, but he's full of beer and he's got on his good thick coat. The collar rasps at the nape of his neck: he feels fuddled and constricted and his tongue is dry. *I'll go for a dip*, he thinks, *that'll shake me loose*; and coming down from the path stands alone on the shore, where deep in the dark mud all the creeks wait for the tide.

'*I'll take a cup o' kindness yet*,' he sings in his sweet chapel tenor, then laughs, and someone laughs back. He unbuttons his coat, he holds it open, but it's not enough: he wants to feel the wind's edge strop itself sharp on his skin. Nearer he goes to the water, and puts out his tongue to the briny air: *Yes – I'll go for a dip*, he thinks, dropping his coat on the marsh. He's done it before, after all, when a boy and in good company: the brave tomfoolery of a midnight dip as the old year dies in the new year's arms. The tide's low – the wind's dropped – the Blackwater holds no fear: give him a glass and he'll drink it down, salt and seashell, oyster and all.

But something alters in a turn of the tide or a change of the air: the estuary surface shifts – seems (he steps forward) to pulse and throb, then grow slick and still; then soon after to convulse, as if flinching at a touch. Nearer he goes, not yet afraid; the gulls lift off one by one, and the last gives a scream of dismay.

Winter comes like a blow to the back of his neck: he feels it penetrate his shirt and go into his bones. The good cheer of drink is gone, and he's comfortless there in the dark – he looks for his coat, but clouds hide the moon and he's blind. His breath is slow, the air is full of pins; the marsh at his feet all at once is wet, as if something out there has displaced the water. *Nothing, it's nothing*, he thinks, patting about for his courage, but there it is again: a curious still moment as if he were looking at a photograph, followed by a frantic uneven motion that cannot be merely the tug of the moon on the tides. He thinks he sees – is *certain* he sees – the slow movement of something vast, hunched, grimly covered over with rough and lapping scales; then it is gone.

In the darkness he grows afraid. There's something there, he feels it, biding its time – implacable, monstrous, born in water, always with an eye cocked in his direction. Down in the deeps it slumbered and up it's come at last: he imagines it breasting the wave, avidly scenting the air. He is seized by dread – his heart halts with it – in the space of a moment he's been charged, condemned, and brought to judgment: oh what a sinner he's been – what a black pip there is at his core! He feels ransacked, emptied of all goodness: he has nothing to bring to his defence. Out he looks to the black Blackwater and there it is again – something cleaving the surface, then subsiding – yes, all along it's been there, waiting, and at last it's found him out. He feels a curious calm: justice must be done, after all, and he willingly pleads guilty. It's all remorse and no redemption, and no less than he deserves.

But then the wind lifts, and tugs the covering cloud, and the shy moon shows her face. It's a scant light, to be sure, but a comfort – and there, after all, is his coat, not a yard away, muddy at the hem; the gulls return to the water, and he feels completely absurd. From the path above him comes the sound of laughter: a girl and

her boy in their festival clothes – he waves and calls 'I'm here! I'm here!' *And I am here*, he thinks: here on the marsh he knows better than his home, with the tide slowly turning and nothing to fear. *Monstrous!* he thinks, laughing at himself, giddy with reprieve: as if there were anything out there but herring and mackerel!

Nothing to fear in the Blackwater, nothing to repent: only a moment of confusion in the darkness and far too much to drink. The water comes to meet him and it's his old companion again; to prove it he draws nearer, wets his boots, holds out his arms: 'Here I am!' he yells, and all the gulls reply. *Just a quick dip*, he thinks, *for auld lang syne*, and laughing slips free of his shirt.

The pendulum swings from one year to the next, and there's darkness on the face of the deep.

I

STRANGE NEWS OUT OF ESSEX

JANUARY

1

One o'clock on a dreary day and the time ball dropped at the Greenwich Observatory. There was ice on the prime meridian, and ice on the rigging of the broad-beamed barges down on the busy Thames. Skippers marked the time and tide, and set their oxblood sails against the north-east wind; a freight of iron was bound for Whitechapel foundry, where bells tolled fifty against the anvil as if time were running out. Time was being served behind the walls of Newgate jail, and wasted by philosophers in cafes on the Strand; it was lost by those who wished the past were present, and loathed by those who wished the present past. Oranges and lemons rang the chimes of St Clement's, and Westminster's division bell was dumb.

Time was money in the Royal Exchange, where men passed the afternoon diminishing their hope of threading camels through a needle's eye, and in the offices of Holborn Bars the long-toothed cog of a master clock caused an electric charge to set its dozen slave clocks chiming. All the clerks looked up from their ledgers, sighed, and looked down once more. On Charing Cross Road time exchanged its chariot for buses and cabs in urgent fleets, and in the wards of Barts and of the Royal Borough pain made hours of minutes. In Wesley's chapel they sang *The sands of time are sinking* and wished they might sink faster, and yards away the ice was melting on the graves in Bunhill Fields.

In Lincoln's Inn and Middle Temple lawyers eyed their calendars and saw statutes of limitation expire; in rooms in Camden and Woolwich time was cruel to lovers wondering how it got so

late so soon, and in due course was kind to their ordinary wounds. Across the city in terraces and tenements, in high society and low company and in the middle classes, time was spent and squandered, eked out and wished away; and all the time it rained an icy rain.

At Euston Square and Paddington the Underground stations received their passengers, who poured in like so much raw material going down to be milled and processed and turned out of moulds. In a Circle Line carriage, westbound, fitful lights showed *The Times* had nothing happy to report, and in the aisle a bag spilled damaged fruit. There was the scent of rain on raincoats, and among the passengers, sunk in his upturned collar, Dr Luke Garrett was reciting the parts of the human heart. '*Left ventricle, right ventricle, superior vena cava*,' he said, numbering them off on his fingers, hoping the litany might slow his own heart's anxious beating. The man beside him glanced up, bemused, then shrugging turned away. '*Left atrium, right atrium*,' said Garrett, beneath his breath: he was accustomed to the scrutiny of strangers, but saw no reason to court it unduly. The Imp, they called him, since he rarely came higher than the shoulders of other men, and had a loping insistent gait that made you feel he might without any warning take a leap onto a window ledge. It was possible to see, even through his coat, a kind of urgent power in his limbs, and his brow bulged above his eyes as if it could barely contain the range and ferocity of his intellect. He affected a long black fringe that mimicked the edge of a raven's wing: beneath it his eyes were dark. He was thirty-two: a surgeon, with a hungry disobedient mind.

The lights went out and relit, and Garrett's destination came closer. He was due within the hour to attend the funeral of a patient, and no man ever wore his mourning clothes more lightly.

Michael Seaborne had died six days before of cancer of the throat, and had endured the consuming disease and the attentions of his doctor with equal disinterest. It was not towards the dead that Garrett's thoughts were now directed, but rather to his widow, who (he thought, smiling) would perhaps be brushing her untidy hair, or finding a button gone on her good black dress.

The bereavement of Cora Seaborne had been the strangest of all he'd seen – but then, he'd known on arrival at her Foulis Street home that something was awry. The atmosphere in those high-ceilinged rooms had been one of confirmed unease seeming to have little to do with sickness. The patient at that time had still been relatively well, though given to wearing a cravat doubling as a bandage. The cravat was always silk, always pale, and often very slightly stained: in such a fastidious man it was impossible to imagine that it was done unconsciously, and Luke suspected him of trying to make his visitors ill at ease. Seaborne had managed to convey the impression of height by being extremely lean, and was so quietly spoken it was necessary to come near in order to hear him. His voice was sibilant. He was courteous, and the beds of his nails were blue. He'd endured his first consultation calmly, and declined an offer of surgery. 'I intend to depart the world as I entered it,' he said, patting the silk at his throat: 'Without scars.'

'There's no need to suffer,' said Luke, offering unsought consolation.

'To suffer!' The idea evidently amused him. 'An instructive experience, I'm sure.' Then he'd said, as if one thought naturally followed from the other: 'Tell me: have you met my wife?'

Garrett recalled often his first meeting with Cora Seaborne, though in truth his memory of it was not to be trusted, having been made in the image of all that followed. She'd arrived at that moment as if summoned, pausing at the threshold to survey her

visitor. Then she'd crossed the carpet, stooped to kiss her husband's brow, and standing behind his chair held out her hand. 'Charles Ambrose tells me no other doctor will do. He gave me your article on the life of Ignaz Semmelweis: if you cut as well as you write, we'll all live forever.' The easeful flattery was irresistible, and Garrett could do nothing but laugh, and bow over the offered hand. Her voice was deep, though not quiet, and he thought at first she had the nomad accent of those who've never lived long in one country, but it was only that she had a faint speech impediment, overcome by lingering on certain consonants. She was dressed in grey, and simply, but her skirt's fabric shimmered like a pigeon's neck. She was tall, and not slender: her eyes also were grey.

In the months that followed Garrett had come to understand a little the unease scenting the Foulis Street air alongside sandalwood and iodine. Michael Seaborne, even in extremities of pain, exerted a malign influence that had little to do with the invalid's usual power. His wife was so ready with cool cloths and good wine, so willing to learn how to slip a needle into a vein, that she might have memorised a manual on a woman's duties down to its last syllable. But Garrett never saw anything passing for affection between Cora and her husband. Sometimes he suspected her of actually willing the brief candle out – sometimes he was afraid she'd take him aside as he prepared a syringe and say, 'Give him more – give him a little more.' If she bent to kiss the starved saint's face on the pillow, it was cautiously, as if she thought he might rear up and tweak her nose in spite. Nurses were hired to dress, and drain, and keep the bed-sheets clean, but rarely lasted a week; the last of these (a Belgian girl, devout) had passed Luke in the corridor and whispered '*Il est comme un diable!*' and shown him her wrist, though there was nothing there. Only the unnamed dog

– loyal, mangy, never far from the bed – had no fear of its master, or at any rate had grown accustomed to him.

In due course Luke Garrett grew familiar with Francis, the Seabornes' black-haired silent son, and with Martha, the boy's nanny, who was given to standing with her arm about Cora Seaborne's waist with a possessive gesture he disliked. Cursory appraisal of the patient was hurriedly got out of the way (after all, what was there to be done?), and Luke would be taken away to survey a fossil tooth Cora had received in the post, or to be interrogated at length as to his ambitions for advancing cardiac surgery. He practised hypnosis on her, explaining how once it had been used in war to ease the removal of soldiers' limbs; they played games of chess, which ended with Cora aggrieved to find her opponent had marshalled his forces against her. Luke diagnosed himself to be in love, and sought no cure for the disease.

Always he was aware of a kind of energy in her, stored up and waiting release; he thought when the end came for Michael Seaborne her feet might strike blue sparks on the pavements. The end did come, and Luke was present for the last breath, which had been laboured, loud, as if at the last moment the patient had set aside the *ars moriendi* and cared only to live a moment longer. And after all Cora was unchanged, neither mourning nor relieved: her voice broke, once, when reporting that the dog had been found dead, but it was not clear whether she was about to laugh or to cry. The death certificate signed, and all that remained of Michael Seaborne resting elsewhere, there was no sound reason for Garrett to make his way to Foulis Street; but he woke each morning with one purpose in mind, and arriving at the iron gates would find himself expected.

The train drew in to Embankment, and he was borne along the platform with the crowd. Grief of a kind came to him then,

though it was not for Michael Seaborne, nor for his widow: what troubled him most was that this might mark the last of his meetings with Cora – that his final view of her would be as he looked over his shoulder while mourning bells tolled. 'Still,' he said: 'I must be there, if only to see the coffin-lid screwed down.' Beyond the ticket barriers ice melted on the pavements; the white sun was in decline.

Dressed as the day demanded, Cora Seaborne sat before her mirror. Pearl drops on gold wires hung at each ear; the lobes were sore, since it had been necessary to pierce them again. 'So far as tears go,' she said, 'these will have to do.' Her face was powdered pale. Her black hat did not suit her, but had both a veil and a black plume of feathers, and conveyed the proper degree of mourning. The covered buttons on her black cuffs would not fasten, and between the hem of sleeve and glove a strip of white skin would be seen. The neckline of her dress was a little lower than she'd have liked, and showed on her collarbone an ornate scar as long as her thumb, and about as wide. It was the perfect replica of the silver leaves on the silver candlesticks that flanked the silver mirror, and which her husband had pressed into her flesh as though he were sinking his signet ring into a pool of wax. She considered painting it over, but had grown fond of it, and knew that in some circles she was enviously believed to have had a tattoo.

She turned from the glass and surveyed the room. Any visitor would pause puzzled at the door, seeing on the one hand the high soft bed and damask curtains of a wealthy woman, and on the other the digs of a scholar. The furthest corner was papered with botanical prints, and maps torn from atlases, and sheets of paper on which quotations were written in her large black capitals (NEVER DREAM WITH THY HAND

ON THE HELM! TURN NOT THY BACK TO THE COMPASS!). On the mantelpiece a dozen ammonites were ranked according to size; above them, captured in a gilded frame, Mary Anning and her dog observed a fallen fragment of Lyme Regis rock. Was it all hers now – that carpet, these chairs, this crystal glass that still gave off the scent of wine? She supposed so, and at the thought a kind of lightness entered her limbs, as if she might come untethered from Newton's laws and find herself spread out upon the ceiling. The sensation was decently suppressed, but all the same she could name it: it was not happiness, precisely, nor even contentment, but relief. There was grief, too, that was certain, and she was grateful for it, since however loathed he'd been by the end, he'd formed her, at least in part – and what good ever came of self-loathing?

'Oh, he made me – yes,' she said, and memory unfurled like smoke from a blown candle. Seventeen, and she'd lived with her father in a house above the city, her mother long gone (though not before she'd seen to it that her daughter would not be damned to samplers and French). Her father – uncertain what to do with his modest wealth, whose tenants liked him contemptuously – had gone out on business and returned with Michael Seaborne at his side. He'd presented his daughter with pride – Cora, barefoot, with Latin on her tongue – and the visitor had taken her hand, and admired it, and scolded her for a broken nail. He came again, and again, until he grew expected; he brought her slim books, and small hard objects of no use. He'd mock her, putting his thumb in the palm of her hand and stroking, so that the flesh grew sore, and it seemed her whole consciousness dwelt there at the touching place. In his presence the Hampstead pools, the starlings at dusk, the cloven prints of sheep in the soft mud, all seemed drab, inconsequential. She grew ashamed of them – of her loose untidy clothes, her unbraided hair.

One day he said: 'In Japan they'll mend a broken pot with drops of molten gold. What a thing it would be: to have me break you, and mend your wounds with gold.' But she'd been seventeen, and armour-clad with youth, and never felt the blade go in: she'd laughed, and so had he. On her nineteenth birthday she exchanged birdsong for feathered fans, crickets in the long grass for a jacket dotted with beetles' wings; she was bound by whalebone, pierced with ivory, pinned by the hair with tortoiseshell. Her speech grew languid to conceal its stumble; she walked nowhere. He gave her a gold ring which was too small – a year later another, and it was smaller still.

The widow was roused from her reverie by footsteps overhead, which were slow, and measured out as precisely as the ticking of a clock. 'Francis,' she said. She sat quietly, waiting.

A year before his father died, and perhaps six months after his disease had first appeared at the breakfast table (a lump in the throat restricting the passage of dry toast), Francis Seaborne had been moved to a room on the fourth floor of the house and at the furthest end of the passage.

His father would've had no interest in domestic arrangements even if he'd not at that time been assisting Parliament with the passage of a housing act. The decision had been made wholly by his mother and by Martha, who'd been hired as nurse when he was a baby, and never, as she herself put it, quite got round to leaving. It was felt that Francis was best kept at arm's length, since he was restless at night and made frequent appearances at the door and even, once or twice, at the window. He'd never ask for water, or for comfort, as any other child might; only stand at the threshold holding one of his many talismans until unease raised a head from the pillow.